Those Who Leave Us

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/48845026.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Characters:	Sirius Black, Regulus Black, Grimmauld Place - Character, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Kreacher (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	it's not a haunted house story, but it's not NOT a haunted house story, this story meanders slowly to its inevitable conclusion, gratuitous references to the black family
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of A Study of Resonance Universe
Collections:	Why...(°口°) ! (pages and pages of google docs links)▒(°ں°)▒, Harry Potter Side Character POV fics, Harry Potter Fanfics with Sirius Black as a main character, Percy Weasley Appreciation (Harry Potter fanfics without Percy-bashing), Harry Potter Gen Fics!, Interesting Fics To Read 😎, Best Harry Potter Fics and fave stories from other fandoms
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-25 Completed: 2024-02-20 Words: 70,550 Chapters: 7/7

Those Who Leave Us

by mymovingfingerwrites

Summary

A companion piece to A Study in Resonance.

Grimmauld Place was not a haunted house -- but Sirius was haunted by it nevertheless. For six months, he sheltered Harry, Ron, and Hermione from the war. For four months, he battled the locket. For one month, he lived alone, with only the half-remembered ghosts of his past to keep him company. Through it all, the house watched, and it listened, and it waited.

(Or, an exploration of what it might mean to have a haunted house in a world where magic and ghosts are very much real, and one's greatest enemy is one's own mind).

Contains spoilers for A Study in Resonance, specifically the chapters that cover HP books 6 and 7.
COMPLETE, posting weekly.

Notes

Nobody asked for this story, but. Here it is. Blame my re-reading of Haunting of Hill House. This is not meant to be scary, but it might be a bit depressing, or possibly even unsettling. This is NOT a sequel to A Study in Resonance, but a companion piece in the same universe detailing some of what happened with Sirius, Harry, Ron, and Hermione while Percy was off doing [REDACTED]. There are mild spoilers/references for ASOR scattered around, but nothing major.

Warning: if you are one of those people who did not enjoy the purebloods in A Study of Resonance, you're going to hate this. We have capital-H Heirs, we have family curses, we have an entirely incorrect Black family tree because the website I used initially seems to be wrong and I didn't want to change the story after I wrote it. If this is not to your tastes, I recommend you click the back button.

(Also, writing this note, I feel like Lemony Snicket. What lies in front of you is a sad story, an unfortunate story, comprising the sad ends of a series of sad people, and you would be better off to close your computer screen and contemplate something far happier, like the intricacies of the water cycle…)

Slumber

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"*...the ones who love us never really leave us, you can always find them in here…" - Sirius Black*

"No ghost in all the long histories of ghosts has ever hurt anyone physically. The only damage done is by the victim to himself. One cannot even say that the ghost attacks the mind, because the mind, the conscious, thinking mind, is invulnerable; in all our conscious minds, as we sit here talking, there is not one iota of belief in ghosts. Not one of us, even after last night, can say the word 'ghost' without a little involuntary smile. No, the menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armor of superstition and have no substitute defense. Not one of us thinks rationally that what ran through the garden last night was a ghost, and what knocked on the door was a ghost, and yet there was certainly something going on in Hill House last night, and the mind's instinctive refuge—self-doubt—is eliminated…" - the doctor, Haunting of Hill House

---

Chapter 1: Slumber

July 1996 // seventeen months remaining

The rain lashed around the house, slighted and angry, as if to cut through the black and grimy exterior and penetrate its vulnerable centre. The house in question was spindly and tall, squeezed between two placid Muggle townhouses sporting warm lighted windows and an array of mundane occupants, and though by all accounts it was the same size and shape as its neighbours, it nevertheless gave off the air of a sooty fireplace reaching toward the sky. As the rain howled savagely around the turrets, displacing dirt to stain the porous brick walls, the house steadied itself against the onslaught and prepared to fight back.

A passing Muggle might have noticed with trepidation that the dark rain cloud brimming uncomfortably low to the ground was nearly crackling with energy, as if lightning were gathering itself to leap to freedom. A more astute wizard would have seen the house wards sparking defensively, almost gleefully, as if energised by the challenge.

Inside the house, the windows rattled fiercely in appreciation, and fat dribbles of water attempted to burrow their way inside any cracks in the wall. The floor vibrated softly as thunder exploded outside, and the house elf in the kitchen looked up, shivered, and pulled his towel tighter around his thin frame. He had lived through many such storms, and he knew that the house was taking energy from the air, storing it deep inside, where the wizard magic lurked and something far more sinistre lay slumbering, to only occasionally rouse itself, like a dragon opening a gimlet eye.

In a large room near the staircase on the third floor from the top—or so a Hogwarts letter had said, twenty-seven years prior—a wizard slept. The large bed seemed to grow from the wall, an iron headboard of curled vines and burnished leaves crowning the wizard's head. The wizard had matted black hair and a wide brow set with thick, bushy eyebrows. His eyes, even in sleep, seemed to be screwed up in deliberation, or perhaps agitation, and his pale mouth was pursed in distress.

The wizard, when he was awake, was named Sirius Black, and he had been sleeping for nearly a year. The expression of pained concentration that marred his once-handsome face far was not a result of disquiet, or at least, not out of any conscious worry. His face often made such expressions these days, and his magic often sparked anxiously around him, and his hands often clenched tightly under the clean white sheets, and his muscles often tensed for long periods of time before they reluctantly unwound themselves into a mistrustful relaxation.

Sirius' unease, had he been awake to analyse it, was attributed to three main factors: the first, that he had been sleeping unceasingly for months already, and his body was growing tired with the effort of keeping him alive; the second, that his dreams were long and unpleasant, and they did not allow him to rest; and the third, that he was once again trapped in his childhood house, and his magic had already recognised the threat that the house posed to him.

But without a cure to the curse, Sirius Black slept without pause, without recourse, and without relief.

And so his story began to draw to a close.

***

He had been cursed by a relative, and the relative had died, killed by one not of their shared blood. (A redheaded boy with a shocked, bright stare, broken quills falling out of one hand). The curse did not know precisely what to do, and it hummed around his body in agitation, seeking vainly for an answer in the leashed power bridled by Bellatrix Lestrange's final actions. This Black heir was strong, stronger than most—perhaps not as strong as Bella, but few had been, and few would ever be again—and the floors of the house had become used to his steps, and the feel of his magic as it asserted itself against the enchantment in the walls.

Perhaps the correct course of action would have been to kill him, too, but the house had been deeded to Sirius, and Sirius had grown up in it, and his father had died in it, and his brother had briefly been its master. One Black woman had walked away from the family, and the other had not stepped foot inside the dark halls of Grimmauld for over two decades. Her magic pulsed softly from Wiltshire, contained within the Malfoy family wards, and the house was uneasy. Thus Sirius slept, unaware.

Alphard Black had been the last to attempt the heritage-stealing curse, and much would have been different had he defeated his eldest brother, Orion, for control of the Black estate and guardianship of its two young heirs. For a brief time before her death, Dorea Potter had contemplated the wisdom of attempting a similar gambit. That Bellatrix knew the spell sufficiently to cast it at a moment's notice did not necessarily indicate that she had been planning to challenge Sirius, and indeed, she had pointed her wand at her cousin intending to kill him there and then, on orders from her Lord and perhaps for her own selfish whims. But in this timeline, something altered, just slightly, perhaps a gust of wind that swirled around Sirius' robes and highlighted their fine gold trim, or the sight of the werewolf reaching for Andy's daughter, or the smell of elf-wine that still lingered on Sirius' breath, so that Bella thought first of her *greed*—and her angry stubborn pride, and her sense of honour, and her scorned entitlement—and chose this spell out of the many in her arsenal.

Bella had, after all, spent much of her time in Azkaban dreaming fretfully of her inheritance, and Sirius had, after all, been in the middle of an early supper with Remus and therefore was wearing his fine dinner robes, which he donned for meals more to piss off his mother than anything, who was continually horrified to see Remus welcome in her home, let alone formally welcomed as a pureblood guest. (Remus *was* pureblood, for all his dirty creature blood, and he had been raised with a jumble of pureblood manners and werewolf guilt, by his sharply proper mother and his agonised, gentle father, so Sirius thought the nice robes were appropriate).

For an extended time, Bella and Sirius had been cellmates, and she had learned quickly that Sirius had never supported the Dark Lord and never intended to, despite the rumours. This had hurt more deeply than the residual welts on her wrists from the chains, though Bella would never admit to such a thing. Bella had been one of the few people to know that Regulus had turned, at the end of his life; indeed, she had been tortured as a way for the Black line to atone for their many sins, and more often than not during her fifteen years in Azkaban, Bella had imagined her baby cousin's tortured screams echoing in her small, dark cell. (Regulus had died alone, sinking quietly into the black murky waters in a far-away cave, but Bellatrix had always assumed the Dark Lord had killed him personally, as would befit the Black heir). To think that at least she would have *Sirius* in company, side-by-side in this nasty, dirty cell…then to lose him, the Black she had always thought herself most similar to, given Narcissa was more delicate than she ought, and Andy a traitor to her own kind…he had been a Gryffindor, yes, but he'd nearly killed Severus with the werewolf, and his command of Dark magic as a child had rivalled hers, and he had the Black rage that simmered relentlessly beneath her skin. He had been like her, or so she'd thought, and they'd spent thirteen years together, door to door, a distorted mirror of their youth, hearkening back to so many nights sleeping in rooms across the hall.

Bella had entertained her own rebellions as a child: she'd callously tossed aside Lucius, so that her sister would have to marry her castoffs; tortured the Nott girl, merely for her own amusement; excelled in her classes, though she ought to have been nothing more than an empty-headed society lady; and demanded of her mother that as the eldest Black child *she* be designated the heir-presumptive, rather than Sirius, who had only the dubious privilege of being born male. Bella had understood rebellions, and she'd always thought Sirius would come back to his family, once he was older.

And if he didn't, he had no right to enjoy the fruits of the many years of prosperous Black labour. He had no right to sit in Grimmauld and be surrounded by centuries of Black knowledge. He had no right to his Gringotts vault, no right to the gold and the jewels and the delicate robes of gently-spun Acromantula silk, no right to elf-wine and house-elf prepared food, not when he'd turned his back on his family and walked away, not when Bella had sacrificed everything—*everything*—to ensure the honourable continuation of her line.

(The house agreed—but the house also rejoiced in its griminess in a way that directly belied centuries of Black haughtiness. To have the children wake in the middle of the night and see a spider, spinning its thread silently above one of their heads, or to conceal a rotting mould beneath a fine gold mirror, or to allow a door to creak open and invite inside a ghoul…the house had its own delights, and its own resentments, and its own envies.

Though of course, the house was nothing without its heirs, and the house knew that too).

Sirius slept, unaware of the turmoil that pushed dirt through the cracks in the floorboards and coaxed a plaintive moan from the peeling black shutters outside. Kreacher noticed but did not understand, and his unease manifested as sharp pain behind his bulbous eyes, and the inability to sleep more than a few hours at a time, as if slumbering in conjunction with his master would cast them both indelibly into the curse's possessive grasp.

Whenever Sirius' magic flared and his brain stirred optimistically toward wakefulness, he saw again imprinted against his closed eyelids the final moments of his cousin's life. How she had twisted slightly away from his curses with nothing more than the sinuous grace of her movements—such a waste, he'd thought angrily, of her many years of private dance instruction—and cackled loudly over Tonks' desperate screams. How her fingers had pressed over the engravings on her wand, twin to his own, a private tapestry of ancient Black runes carved by the stooped old wizard that serviced the Black family for generations. Remus' voice echoed in Sirius' dampened mind, his agonised shout, his snarl of uncontrollable rage, and Harry's distant screaming, and the nearly soundless flash of green as Barty Crouch killed his only son.

Yet in many ways, the cursed sleep was a relief to his ravaged body. His magic ghosted over the open wounds that lingered on the verge of festering, and his skin knit itself together laboriously and carefully. By the end of the third week, the deadened nerves at the tips of his fingers—damaged by over two decades of Padfoot’s bare paws against the ground—sparked with new life, and the tension that perpetually lined his shoulders and lingered in the small of his back unwound, and his spine straightened, releasing the bubble of trapped air encased by thirteen years hunched over in a small cell. On some nights, the entire house seemed to let loose a hesitant exhale, as its heir relaxed into his healed body and his magic sang comfortingly around his limbs.

Perhaps it would have been better for Sirius to pass the rest of his life asleep. Sirius may have spent most of his life acting in accordance to others’ whims, but to end his life in the same way he lived it—an accidental conquest, an unknowing player in a game far too large for him to see, trapped in Grimmauld Place—was, in many ways, a tragedy, and a shade too predictable for comfort.

If Albus Dumbledore had not hesitated before telling his trusted spy of the Horcruxes; if Bellatrix Lestrange had not noticed the fine cut of Sirius' robes and felt a sudden surge of resentment; if Narcissa Malfoy had not been called to meet her sister on the same day that her son was nearly killed by the Boy Who Lived; and if Kreacher had died along with Regulus Black for their perfidy to the Dark Lord, perhaps Sirius would have survived.

If. Two letters to change the world, and two letters to keep it as is, as the old Head of Ravenclaw House used to intone in the face of student questions too laborious or lengthy to dive into at present.

Yet all of the above did come to pass, and a few other events besides, so that Sirius would spend the last night of his life in his brother's room, battling the locket that killed them both.

***

August 1996 // sixteen months remaining

Sirius dreamt.

Those who sat nervously by his bedside all felt the same creeping fear that perhaps the type of dreams that crept their way slowly into his head in the full heat of the afternoon, dust notes swirling ominously in the filtered desolate sun, were not quite *normal* dreams. For one, they lasted hours; entire afternoons passed with the Black heir stretched motionless on his bed, nothing moving save a family of moths in the upper left corner, and the curl of the curtains by the window, and the agitated twitching of his eyes. For another, he never woke from them, but dove smoothly into the next, small droplets of magic pooling agitatedly above his face each time he briefly had an opportunity to wake. Sometimes his magic sparked anxiously above his head as small coloured gusts that swirled above his body and smelled vaguely of sulphur.

There were dreams that left him feeling warm and sticky and redolent; Sirius sweated through these dreams, his body taut and frightened, seeking desperately the cool relief of a sharp breeze, or a whispered spell. Still other dreams were cold, colder than anything he had felt even in the midst of a Scottish winter, and his breath misted above his half-parted lips, and his brow began to contract and shiver. Others were so still, so quiet, that his heart would leap in alarm to ensure he was still alive, and the house would tremble, as if holding its breath.

And, though Sirius himself would not realise this for many months, there were dreams that were not his own.

First born, first failed, the house had whispered to him as a child, and again now, as he slept fitfully, his muscles tensed and his limbs tangled in the silk sheets. ***An heir and a spare, for an heir that is unworthy.***

Grimmauld Place was nine stories high, a number its architect claimed was magically powerful, though in actuality three magical floors per one physical floor was the best the wizard could do at the time. Though most scions of the Black family took Arithmancy and would have known better, many of them snobbishly repeated to their friends—witches and wizards with seven floors, most commonly, or thirteen—that *nine* was more powerful than typically known, for reasons they could not reveal due to family loyalty. To be a Black was to always feel the sharp prick of anxiety that their legacy was too tenuous to rely on, that each generation could be the last, despite their status and heritage. Their mingled insecurity and entitlement was not unique to their family, but it was particularly pronounced, and particularly pernicious.

There was a thin, windy staircase forming the disjointed spine of the house, and each floor was designed to be more or less the same: a small landing, a single room on the right, and a narrow hallway to the left which led to a series of tilted rooms. On some floors, there was slight deviation: a sprawling library claimed most of the fifth floor, while the seventh sported an old potions lab, last used by Castor and Pollux Black for their experiments.

(There was a basement too, but even the formally designated heirs never ventured down past the landing with the troll leg and the glossy floors. They had heard the stories and they did not wish to determine the truth from the myths).

The effect of these floors stacked precariously on each other was a constant sense of movement, like the nauseating sway of a boat moored in the middle of a flat, empty sea. The thick glazed windows stubbornly refused to allow more than a damp, muted glow to graze the carpeted floor, regardless of the weather outside, and the ceaseless activity of the portraits and the creatures that lived in the walls created a gentle susurration, like long grass waving in the plains, or the bristling of trees in a forest.

The very top floor, by tradition, was designated for the head of the house, configured more like a confined penthouse than a series of rooms. Sirius had only entered three times: once as a child, once at sixteen, and once after his parents died. None of these three interactions left him with the sense that he wanted to claim the rooms as his own, and judging from the eerily precise way they were still laid out—his mother's inlaid brush on the large oak cabinet and his father's robes hanging in a line—Regulus had felt the same way.

There were other houses, too: a summer manor, and a cottage in France, and even a flat in Hogsmeade that was ceremoniously bequeathed to Regulus after Sirius had left, not that Sirius had known, the one time he'd shown up at his brother's place after graduation and shouted for him to come to his senses. And though Grimmauld Place was ostensibly built only a few generations ago, the history of the house was far older, and far more sinister, and the magic that lurked underneath the rotten floorboards had followed the Black family for a very long time.

***

December 1996 // twelve months remaining

Sirius dreamt, and Bella died, and both Andromeda and Narcissa grieved in their own ways, and downstairs Kreacher clattered in the kitchen, making more noise than his mistress ever would have allowed him, in the vain hope that perhaps Master Sirius would wake and shout at him for his interruption. As the days passed, Kreacher eventually mustered enough courage to clean inside Sirius' room, and after a time he even gave Sirius baths, touching his pale, limp limbs cautiously as he had not since Sirius was a child, and smoothing his wrinkled palm over Sirius' clenched hands.

Sirius dreamt, and Harry visited him over the Christmas holidays, the outcome of an extended fight between him and Molly Weasley, so that Christmas morning saw Harry and Remus sitting soberly by Sirius' side. The small tree that Remus conjured seemed to wilt more with each passing second, and both Harry and Remus felt curiously absolved of remorse when Remus vanished it upon their departure.

Sirius dreamt, and Tonks practised her wandless magic and read aloud from the Auror handbook by his side, and Andromeda forced nutrient potions down Sirius' throat with an efficient series of spells, and upstairs Percy Weasley paced back and forth in Regulus' room, battling an impossible task, his mind too full of ghosts for him to add yet another to the list.

Sirius dreamt, and he saw many things that were not from his own memories, and he moaned and cried out in distress, his fingers curled angrily, his wand safely out of reach, and his cousin's laughter high and shrill in his ears, and he heard his cousin sobbing, and beneath it all was a low-throated chuckle, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose and his muscles tensed for hours.

***

Sirius dreamt, and Mundungus Fletcher lingered soundlessly in the house after an Order meeting and swept a whole pile of glittering junk into a canvas bag, his heart beating nervously as he kept an eye out for that damned house elf. And it *was* odd that Kreacher was not behind him, long ears cocked, attuned to the silent disturbance of a thief in their midst, but Sirius had cried out, an unfamiliar seizure capturing his muscles, and Kreacher was by his master's side nervously. The house too was distracted, or perhaps curious, or perhaps eager for the taint to leave them be, and so a door in a hallway swung open, and an idea floated through Mundungus' mind. Mundungus normally would not have dared to go to such a high floor for his search, but something in the back of his mind prompted him, reminded him that Molly Weasley had forbidden her children from entering the room unaided, and he found himself stepping through the doorway before he had realised he had moved.

(Mundungus supposed later, his cheek smarting and his wares stolen, that he ought to have known better than to tangle with cursed Black goods, and perhaps he *had* known and ignored

the soft bells of warning that chimed in his head. Yet as soon as he stole away from the house, Sirius relaxed, and Andromeda and Tonks conferred quietly with Remus and decided cautiously that the danger, insofar as there could be *danger* in an enchanted sleep, had passed).

It was not difficult to sell the goods that Mundungus stole. As long as there had been wealthy lords and glittering gold and silver trinkets, there had been places to sell them surreptitiously, and Mundungus knew all the right people. The brass dining set that Mundungus had wrestled from a locked cabinet on the first floor fetched a good price, and the teardrop earrings he'd found in a crusty kitchen cabinet turned out to be real diamonds, and of course he had a steady supply of silver spoons, stolen one-by-one after supper. Mundungus did not feel any sort of guilt about using Sirius' things to fund his illicit lifestyle; Sirius hated the bloody house, he'd always said so, and Mundungus had been taking things for the last year without anyone noticing. Mundungus reckoned he was rather doing Sirius a favour.

The locket, though—this one he kept for himself. He wouldn't have been able to say why, had he been pressed. It was clearly old and a tad tarnished, and the large *S* on the front (Selwyn, perhaps?) was a bit showy. But Mundungus had lived the life of a thief for many years, and he'd never been able to keep any of the treasures for himself. He was perpetually on the verge of bankruptcy (particularly as he did not trust the bloody goblins to hide his money and so kept his fortune scattered in hiding places all around the country) and always had to work to feed himself. He'd taken every disgusting, embarrassing job there was, and even being in the Order was a lark, what with Alastor ordering him around. They wanted him to do their dirty work and they judged him for his methods. It wasn't *fair*, and Mundungus was so tired of the world being unfair to him.

So Mundungus kept the locket, and it whispered to him, and then one day, it left him cold. Perhaps the soul of Tom Riddle trapped inside was not happy at its ignominious heir. Perhaps it could only muster enough strength to glitter enticingly under Mundungus' shirt, waiting for an astute passerby to recognise its value. Perhaps it acted more intentionally. Umbridge in many ways was not much better of a carrier, but perhaps the locket sensed her maliciousness or reached out desperately at any opportunity to leave its squalour behind, and one day she paused in a routine search through Diagon Alley, and something caught her eye.

Percy Weasley would never know that he searched for the locket only three days too late, that had he gone to the caves earlier, he would have found the damned thing sitting demurely inside a cabinet and saved them all a lot of trouble. Of all the forces acting on their lives during the war, the frivolousness that drove the locket to leave the house, only to return a year later clutched triumphantly in Sirius Black's sweaty hands, was undoubtedly one of the most tragic.

Yet the locket did leave, and Sirius began to grow stronger even as his body appeared to deteriorate, and Andromeda Black poured over the books in the upstairs library, searching for the right counter-curse to Bella's last gift to Sirius. To end an inheritance curse was not easy, but Andromeda was a fearsome witch, and she had grown outside of the heavy influence of the Black family, and she loved Sirius, even years later, just as she loved Bella and Cissy and Reg, despite it all. Perhaps this love was why the younger generation of Blacks were able to battle their family curse, though it consumed nearly all of their lives in the process. They had

been raised together, and grown together, and they trusted each other in a way previous Blacks hadn't, and they had cowered from their parents together, and they had dreamed fitfully of a different world, one where they could stride through life unchallenged, taking what they were owed, without the heavy oppression they faced in so many ways. They loved each other and they hated each other too, and in death their faces looked the same, cool and imperious, matching stern eyebrows and thick eyelashes, pale, lovely lips and high cheekbones. They were all so young, even Bella, when they died, barely three decades to any of their names, and they were all still children in their own ways, still stuck indelibly in the past, unable to grow beyond who they used to be.

It had begun so many years ago with Cissy and Bella and Andy whispering together in the dark, and Sirius regarding Regulus with dark, upset eyes. ***Come with me*****,** Sirius had said to Regulus, and when he had said no, Sirius had gone instead to Andromeda, who had tutored him on the proper way to ask Dorea Potter for refuge in her house. Bella had looked after Regulus in Sirius' stead, guiding him through the dizzying intricacies of Slytherin politics, and ensured he had a safe, comfortable position brewing potions for the Dark Lord with that slimy Severus Snape, where Regulus would be safely out of harm's way. Narcissa ran away to Wiltshire to marry her older sister's ex-boyfriend on their mother's command and lived with the guilt of it for many years, only for it all to bubble up in a dirty room in Hogsmeade, facing the shockingly familiar defiant glint in her other sister's eyes.

Harry had thought, the first time that he'd met Andromeda Black, that she looked like Bellatrix Lestrange, and certainly they shared the same features, flashing eyes and strong features and thin, pursed lips. He thought it again when he watched her slit her palms with a cursed knife, dripping blood over her cousin's face as she chanted the claim speech and willed her cousin back to life.

There was a moment when the curse murmured to itself uncertainly. Andromeda felt a strange singing in her breast as the magic took note of her power. Here was a Black heir removed from the family by one who had already died. Her blood dripped wetly onto Sirius' face, and the house took note of its smell while it conferred with the curse, which hummed fitfully around their bodies. Harry was silent, his hands clenched, and the small of his back scratching with his partial claim to the Black line.

I relinquish my claim to this life, Andromeda thought to herself fiercely, driven by a strange, solemn instinct and the evaluative nip of magic at the base of her neck. *I do not wish to be an heir to this house.*

Slighted, the curse withdrew, and Andromeda locked eyes with Harry from across the room, and together they forced Sirius to wake.

After nine months, Sirius blinked open weary blue eyes and immediately recoiled. Bright lights, shockingly so, and the strange smell of a nearby candle, and the silk sheets around his damp limbs, and a persistent ringing in his ears, and the odd taste of blood upon his lips.

A victory, yet an uneasy one, and in the kitchen below Kreacher cowered into himself, twisting his towel between his fingers as the curse winged vengefully out of the open back door.

***

April 1997 // eight months remaining

After so many months of dark, heavy sleep, one might think that to be awake would be to be light and freed and unfettered. Yet Sirius, for many days after his abrupt waking, found it difficult to shake the impression he was still asleep, lost in one of those long, languorous dreams he still remembered in sharp, painful impressions. That faint gnawing hunger, for instance—it was somehow far more persistent than his thirteen years hovering at the edge of starvation in Azkaban, and nothing that Kreacher cooked up in the kitchen could stave it off. Or the voices that he felt stirring the clouds at the back of his mind, despite his attempts at Occlumency.

(Cissy and Andy had always been the best at Occlumency; Sirius, Bella, and Regulus had never quite mastered the requisite control, the specific type of self-awareness needed to build and maintain mental shields. Sirius never gained the ability to walk through his mind, but he had been able, he could have perhaps seen Hogwarts, too—but an older Hogwarts, a derelict Hogwarts, one whose shadows warred with the soft golden light of remembered youth, one where great gaping holes in the wards around certain areas betrayed him despite his efforts. Or perhaps he wouldn't have conjured Hogwarts at all, though in all truth he would be hard pressed to imagine another place to build to guard his innermost thoughts).

"Remember that you are awake," Remus said to him, more than once. Remus placed a great value in *remembering*, as if Sirius could look in the mirror and tell himself he was awake and be able to believe it was true. People can believe they are awake in dreams, as Sirius knew all too well, and pinching the soft underside of his wrist did nothing save make himself wince. Remus seemed to believe that to think of oneself as *alive* despite the evidence otherwise was the most productive use of one's time, but Sirius could not say he agreed.

Yet Sirius obeyed, if only because he had nothing else to do. For several weeks after his miraculous return to the living, he told himself purposefully and firmly that he was *alive*, he was *awake*, he was *aware.* He told himself this every time he heard the echo of a whisper in the back of his mind, or the walls seemed to be pressing in on him as he stood in the centre of the room. He began to take very cold and quick showers, though in school he had been well renowned among the boys' dormitories for the length of his showers, not to mention the warbling vibrato that would accompany the steam. (His mother had signed both him and Regulus up for voice lessons at a young age, perhaps lamenting her lack of daughters, and the talent had come far more easily to Sirius than to Regulus, who never could quite get used to the sound of his own voice). The shock of the cold water raining down on his head, even in his childhood bathroom, was the best approximation that Sirius could manage, the best explanation for what it had felt like to blink open his eyes and feel all at once how *heavy* the last few months had been, and how swiftly they had passed, and how old he suddenly felt, in a body that did not feel like his own.

What he did not say to Remus, nor to Tonks, nor even to Andy, who resolutely visited him each week with a stubborn expression reminiscent of Cissy, is that he had seen Andy's face hovering over his and thought *first* with a dawning sense of relief that he had died. Only after he had experienced this feeling bursting in his breast came the weighty thud of understanding that he was still alive, and dreadfully thirsty, and that he had not moved for a very long time. (Alive, awake, aware. He was, he was, he was.)

(Well, he supposed that perhaps Remus could guess at the particulars of his feelings. Remus had always been like that, his amber eyes more kindly and knowing than they ever had any right to be, even at eleven. Sirius had been quite mean to Remus for the first few months of their shared acquaintance, inquiring in his best snooty pureblood voice as to the state of Remus' tattered robes and uneven hair and strange scars on the back of his knobbly hands, each sharp rebuke an attempt at protection against the force of the soft understanding that Remus managed to exude even at his most timid. In the weeks that followed Sirius' awakening, Remus seemed to discern that Sirius could not trust himself to sleep for more than a few hours at a time, and he managed to invent all manner of excuses for why he too might be awake at three in the morning, when Sirius had always known his friend to sleep on average for ten hours a night. Something about the wolf, if Sirius had to guess, though Remus was always fiercely defensive about any difference in his needs on account of his *monthly problem*.)

But eventually, Remus could not spend every second of his day in Grimmauld; for one, he insisted on maintaining a *job*, though both James and Sirius had offered more than once to employ or otherwise fund Remus, if only so that he could stop debasing himself by sorting Potions ingredients in Knockturn Alley or driving Muggle cars around London. For another, his *monthly problem* had become larger during Sirius' slumber, or so Remus told Sirius on one of their last nights together, and he had been asked by Albus to sniff out the source of the rumours that the largest werewolf gathering of their time had been scheduled for year end.

(Silence, when Remus left, and Tonks was tied up at work, and Harry was still at Hogwarts, and Sirius began to hear the loud ticking of the grandfather clock on the wall echo in his ears, and the soft scraping of Kreacher's mop over the dirty kitchen floor, and the rustlings of his mother talking to one of the other portraits. Silence, but there was something underneath the silence, a slithering, perhaps, or a hiss in his ear, or the quiet *drip-drip-drip* of a faucet overhead, though he checked each bathroom defiantly, wand out, and found them all to be empty. He had never heard silence that was quite so *loud*, even before the curse).

Andy's presence in Grimmauld Place had come initially as a bit more of a surprise, particularly when she revealed proudly—the twist of her eyebrows more Bella than Narcissa, he supposed—to Sirius one night that she had been somehow inducted into the Order and reinstated onto the Black tapestry.

"My congratulations, I suppose," Sirius replied to the news, a bit bemused at the sharp flash in her eyes. "You're more than welcome to the dubious honour of being once more a Black. Are you going to challenge me over the house, then?"

When Andy drew herself up like that, bristling, she looked the most like Regulus out of any of them. Sirius allowed the memory of his brother to pass through his mind with practised

detachment and waited for her response. “If I wanted the house, cousin, I would have taken it from you while you slept, rather than risk my life to awaken you.”

Sirius shrugged one shoulder, a gesture that had always made his mother hex him if she spotted it. “I’ll trade you for yours, if you key me into the wards.”

After another second, Andy huffed out a laugh and relaxed into herself. Sirius watched her curiously as she flicked her wand at her cup of tea, causing it to boil again. He’d forgotten that particular small rebellion, despite both of their mothers’ insistence that tea must be served at the precisely palatable temperature. He wondered if she reheated her tea in her home with Ted, or whether she only felt the urge in Grimmauld. Narcissa’s attempt at a rebellion had always been to claim the most delicate cup when their mothers would force on Bella the sturdier, uglier option. Even as a child, they had all known better than to trust Bella with beauty.

He couldn't say he blamed Andy, if it was the house that caused her to fall back into her childhood patterns. Grimmauld had much the same effect on him. The long, narrow staircases were precisely as claustrophobic as he’d remembered from the hours he’d spent hovering between severed elf heads and disapproving portraits, straining to listen for a hint of voices from the array of curious company his parents had entertained in the downstairs parlour, primarily wizards with hard faces and sneering mouths. The bathrooms were as awful, perennially damp and cramped as ever, despite Kreacher’s pretence of cleaning them, nothing like the spacious and sunny dorm bathrooms in Gryffindor tower. The only rooms that Sirius could even tolerate were the kitchen and the adjoining parlour, though he had to banish Kreacher with a lengthy and complex task to the other side of the house whenever he felt the urge to be alone. He couldn't hear Kreacher's pathetic, warbling voice without thinking of Regulus, who had always been more fond of Kreacher than their parents would have liked.

“I thought Nymphadora might be back on the tapestry,” Andy admitted, setting the cup back onto its saucer without a sound, a familiar gesture which suggested to Sirius that perhaps the reheating of the tea had been equally instinctive. "She's not, but I think I know how to add her."

Nymphadora Tonks was a woman that James would have adored, a thought that never failed to put a rueful smile on Sirius’ face, the same sort of expression he often saw on Remus’ face when he spoke of Harry. Sirius quite enjoyed having her around the house, not least because each time she came, she cheerfully and obligingly helped him destroy some disgusting Black artefact. They had begun cleaning out the upper Black library on Remus’ suggestion; Molly had initiated the process with the large army of Weasley children the previous year, but she’d seemingly lost the desire halfway through, not that Sirius could blame her. Sirius preferred Tonks to this task to Remus, who tended to want to *catalogue* the items. Sirius would tell Remus that he had enough personal experience with most of the artefacts to complete a senior project on any of them—at least those that had been in vogue while Uncle Pollux and Uncle Castor had been alive—but Remus was liable to adopt that pained, angry expression that tended also to accompany Sirius’ blithe references to Azkaban or his miserable childhood, and Sirius had endured quite enough of that look for a lifetime.

(Scuttling, overhead; skittering, chittering, creatures with minuscule scales and hairy feelers, the type that used to live in Uncle Pollux's pockets or Uncle Castor's bag, during a time in Sirius' life when for months Sirius had been too afraid to sleep, thinking that he might wake and there would be a beetle in his ear or a spider crawling out of his mouth).

It was not that he was as *traumatised* as Remus would like to think. For the first two years after Sirius had starved himself—slowly and deliberately, as to ensure his skinny dog body could fit between the iron bars, after he had hidden himself away from the lurking Dementors and memorised the layout of the cells so that he could stagger through them with the thin light of the full moon leaking through the cracks in the grey, mouldy stone, after he had swum, half-delirious, across the frigid and choppy water, only to collapse midway through, with only a dizzying half-memory of the slices of the waves as they lashed his body with a sharp, freezing spray—for those first two years, Sirius had woken with nightmares more often than not, both when he was alone in the caves near Hogsmeade and when Remus had moved into Grimmauld with him after the tumultuous events of the Triwizard Tournament. Those were the years when even the sight of the sun filtering through leaves could bring Sirius to tears, and being proximate to Hogwarts had singed inside Sirius' breast with a terrible, burning pain. He could admit now, with the wisdom of these past few years, that he had been something approaching traumatised then, and Remus had undoubtedly noticed.

And yes, he could understand in retrospect why Remus so often looked like he wanted to kill something. Sirius would quite like to kill something too, starting with his *dear* cousin Bella, and perhaps ending with those awful Muggles that had dared to mistreat James' son, and certainly including the bloody *rat*. But Sirius had *healed*, and he no longer was liable to collapse at the shocking beauty of the oak tree outside, nor the sound of rain lashing the walls outside, nor the damp smell of Grimmauld Place rot that lingered in his nostrils when he awoke (as if a steam had crept insidiously into his nostrils as he slept) so he reckoned that Remus had no right to look at him as if he may still break at any moment.

"Perhaps she can, after the war," Sirius offered to Andromeda, realising belatedly that he had not spoken for quite a few minutes. Andy smiled blandly at him and sipped again from her tea, pointedly, until Sirius lifted his own cup to his mouth. The tea was cold; with an ironic quirk of his lips, Sirius snapped his fingers theatrically over his mother's best china until the liquid began to steam anew. Sirius could quite understand Andy's sentiment, after those thirteen awful years. He never wanted to have anything cold ever again, not even the soft ice cream that had been his and Regulus' tradition after shopping for their books, nor the cool foam of a tall glass of Butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks. Everything in Azkaban had been too cold, so cold that it nipped at his ears and sent pained shivers down his fingers, that his toes had clenched together for warmth, and his bones had ached inside his shallow shell of a body. He froze himself each morning in the shower, as penance, or punishment, and then spent the rest of his day seeking warmth.

"Perhaps," said Andromeda, watching with a shade of her mother's attentiveness until Sirius had set the cup back into the saucer. She directed the teapot to fill his cup again, which he rolled his eyes at but did not openly protest. Sirius did not fully understand how Andy had found her way into his life again—he had seen her just twice in the past few years, only long enough to realise that she had a daughter and a Muggleborn husband and therefore could not be endangered by associating with him—but he could not say he was not pleased by her

company. With Regulus dead, and Narcissa married to a Death Eater, and Bellatrix killed by Remus—which reminded Sirius that he ought to see how Remus was doing, all things considered, as Remus had never dealt with death as easily as the rest of them—Sirius did not have many relatives left that he would consider *appropriate company*, though the portrait of his mother downstairs would disagree. “Did you know that my daughter has been seeing Remus Lupin?”

Sirius instinctively bared his teeth without realising he had made the gesture. At Andy’s raised eyebrow, he coloured slightly, pulling his lips forcibly back over his teeth. He would have thought perhaps he’d spent the past few months asleep as Padfoot, given how Padfoot’s reactions seem to be so much more prevalent than his own, these days, but Remus and Andy had both assured him that he had been human each time they’d checked. “I guessed something of the sort.”

Sirius was not, quite frankly, sure what it is about the relationship that managed to sprout between Tonks and Remus during his coma that bothered him. He could understand how it would have occurred; by the sounds of it, neither had left his side particularly often, though Tonks had also managed to become a fully fledged Auror, or something close to it, which had made Sirius and his two years of Auror Academy quite proud. He would trust Remus with his life, so he couldn't say that he couldn't trust Remus with Tonks.

Yet something about the idea of them *together* sat uncomfortably in Sirius’ stomach. Perhaps it was that Tonks seemed so young to him. She was just barely ten years younger than him, or so he calculated, and he supposed that a ten year gap was perfectly acceptable. His own parents had been seven years apart in age, though their marriage was hardly one to hold up to the light as a fine specimen of love, considering their union had wreaked far more unhappiness on the world than the opposite. But Tonks was full of light and laughter in a way that Sirius and Remus were not, and Sirius couldn't understand how Remus had managed to overcome his characteristic self-loathing long enough to consent to be in a relationship with his young, bright cousin.

“I’ve asked him not to propose,” Andy continued. “Until the war is over, one way or another.”

The *war* was another thing that Sirius had missed out on over the last year, trapped into a sticky, drowsy sleep. Andy told him most of it, and Tonks a bit more, and Remus the rest, though each seemed to be concealing something from him in their own ways. During the months that Sirius had been asleep, Remus had killed Bellatrix, though he’d admitted softly to Sirius that he didn’t quite recollect the exact moment that it had happened. In the heat of battle, occasionally the wolf became dominant, which was precisely why even in the last war, Remus had never volunteered for duelling, and why Sirius had found it so shamefully easy to believe his second oldest friend had joined the Death Eaters. Harry, apparently, had resisted Voldemort’s possession, something that Sirius could not quite wrap his head around, and the Ministry had been forced to admit that the Dark Lord had truly returned to England.

Though, by the sounds of it, the Ministry was not being particularly active. Tonks always maintained that Scrimgeour and Moody had more of a plan than they seemed to let on, but Remus was always quite loudly disparaging of the Ministry. Sirius was so bloody tired of

people having *plans* that they did not let on about, at least to him. Did it matter if the Minister were collaborating with the Head of the Aurors, he raged to Remus, who listened quietly, or if Albus were amassing strength quietly in the Order, if people were still dying in droves each day?

At least the school year was nearly over; Harry wrote to Sirius every week, and underneath the messy scrawl—Ron, dating Lavender Brown, much to Hermione's disapproval, and the unpleasant spectre of Snivellus haunting Remus' old classroom, and Slughorn's interminable dinners, and Dumbledore's Army, reunited for another year—there was a slight waver, a sense that Harry was perfectly aware of what he would face once the summer began and Hogwarts closed. Sirius couldn't say he blames him. There was something that Harry wasn't telling him, nor Remus, nor Andy, nor Tonks, and Sirius was patient enough to know he ought to wait until Harry joined him again at Grimmauld to pry. But that *something,* a sense of longing in Harry's words, as if he were already aware of how fleeting his time at Hogwarts had been, as if he knew how tenuous his grasp on childhood was—Sirius recognised it, and it chilled him deep inside.

At sixteen, Sirius had felt the same fear, the same hesitation, the same angry resentment that the adult world was soon to grasp him with its scaly claws and never let go. At sixteen, his parents had decided to formally name him their heir, a year later than they ought, which had been embarrassing and yet filled Sirius with an air of shocked relief to realise that no contract lay in front of him on his fifteenth birthday. At sixteen, they had begun to make stipulations on him, and he'd realised that they'd let him run wild at Hogwarts precisely because they knew they would be able to control him, when the time came, that they had methods of ensuring his compliance.

And at sixteen, Sirius had lit the contract on fire when it lay placidly next to his toast and pumpkin juice, and left all his things to rot in Grimmauld, and abandoned Regulus to his fate instead, and fled to James, who had always joked that his parents had wanted a second son.

Sirius did not have the steady warmth of Charlus Potter, nor the clever wit of Dorea, and Grimmauld was a far cry from Potter Manor, but Sirius would give Harry the refuge he deserved, and he would levy the entire force of the Black family fortune to protect his godson from harm. He *would*, he vowed to himself, and he squeezed his cup of tea so tightly that the delicate china broke, and the scalding water washed over his legs. *Alive, awake, aware*, he told himself as Andy jumped to her feet to help him, and he looked down at the blood that welled from the cuts on his hand with something like satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

I haven’t forgotten about Percy and Severus. I kept getting writer’s block so I thought starting on something new and short (relatively speaking) would clear the cobwebs a bit. Let me know if you enjoy. If you don't...sorry.

Intention

Chapter Notes

Some people asked me in ASOR why Dumbledore didn't confide about the Horcruxes to Severus -- I figured he would have told Sirius instead, given Sirius was still alive. I didn't make that super clear in ASOR so I'll try and go back and add something to clarify that.

>> UPDATE - I have since learned that Dumbledore didn't tell Severus about the Horcruxes in canon, either, or at least not explicitly. Pretty interesting. Poor guy.

Also, this chapter has my incorrect Black family tree. Just go with it. Sirius' father is Orion Black, who in this story has three brothers: Castor / Pollux (twins) + Alphard (the uncle who gave Sirius money when he ran away).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2: Intention

The relationship between a house elf and its family was, if not a sacred, nevertheless important and protected in its own way. Grimmauld Place had hosted generations of young Blacks, but it had enslaved generations of house elves too, and had their heads hung next to their masters for eternity. There were few wizarding scholars who cared to study house elves, but house elves *were* different from forest elves, or brownies, or the fae. House elves could not exist without a house, though of course centuries of tradition held that house elves required masters. Indeed, Kreacher had lived quite peacefully for over a decade without an occupant of Grimmauld Place, though he had mourned Regulus and feared for Sirius in his own way. He had gone mad, yes, but it had not been because the house was empty of wizard-magic.

(Sometimes, when the house was very still and very silent, Kreacher would stand in the middle of the hallway, a dirty rag in hand, and think suddenly of a dark cave, of water lapping against the shore, of a pain he had never felt before and never would again, and have the acute sensation that he was a small ant and the house raged above him like a monster, watching his every move).

Sirius did not know whether Kreacher was happy to see that he lived, or resentful, or relieved. Certainly his mother's portrait struggled through the same gamut of confused emotions each time they spoke. Sirius did not know whether his mother had ever cared for him, but there were still a few memories, lingering in the back of his mind, of her cool, rare approval, or a sudden, unexpected laugh, or the warm feeling of her body absorbing his during the rare moments she would allow him to touch her. When he dressed himself in his finest pale green robes and stood defiantly in front of her portrait, he was surprised to see an

echo of these memories play torturously across her face. There was a single moment of surprised relief to see him alive before disdain rolled in like clouds gathering to the east, and Sirius was shocked and discomfited in turn to see even a hint of vulnerability from the feared Walburga Black.

With Kreacher, too, there were ghost memories—hands smoothing his brow, trimming his hair behind his ears, feeling for a pulse in the soft of his wrist—yet Sirius could not discern what emotions swam beneath Kreacher's bulbous eyes. He supposed the elf was no different after his ordeal than before. Kreacher had cared for him throughout his turbulent youth and then despised him openly during his first confinement in Grimmauld, so Sirius ought not to have expected anything other than the same pained resentment. Merlin knew the elf was old enough to join his forefathers on the wall, though Sirius had to admit Kreacher looked no older than he had during Sirius' youth.

Still. Something tugged at Sirius when he saw Kreacher these days, as if there was something he had remembered and later forgot.

(*A gold chain glimmering wetly in a leathered old palm, a boat rising from the depths, a young man with dark hair and flashing eyes.* ***Go,*** *he screamed hoarsely.* ***Go while you still can.***)

***

May 1997 // seven months remaining

Seeing Albus again after what felt like years was an—odd experience. Albus did not come immediately, but he *did* come. Sirius fretted away the morning prior, wondering uncomfortably if Albus remembered the argument that Sirius had thrown savagely in his face, the last they spoke.

(*"You have never kept him safe," Sirius had said, and an expression of great pain had crossed Albus' face and stilled Sirius' tongue.)*

But when Albus arrived in Grimmauld Place, he greeted Sirius warmly, and Sirius was gratified to see relief and unguarded joy after Albus performed a series of spells and proclaimed him well.

"I am sorry that I was not able to heal you sooner," Albus said gravely, settling in his customary seat closest to the fireplace. "I admit I did not trust Madam Tonks as I ought to have. She cares for you deeply and worked tirelessly to discover the particulars of the curse. I initially thought her interest in you may be more…self serving, but was most happy to be proven wrong."

Kreacher served them tea silently. Sirius caught a strange rebellious glare from Kreacher's otherwise impenetrably wrinkled face, and he looked down at his teacup, noticing that Albus had been served out of a different set than he.

Albus did not seem to take offence, though after Kreacher left, he winked at Sirius and solemnly directed his magic to the old grate. Sirius opened his mouth to inform Albus that the fireplace had not worked for many years, though he shut it a second later, watching with a strange, absent sort of glee as a merry fire sparked up playfully, tongues of maroon mixed with gold.

For a long second, Sirius stared at the fire, and he leaned toward it unconsciously, surprised a second later to realise he had moved. He did not notice either the sorrow that briefly flit across Albus' lined face, nor the grimace of pain as Albus massaged his blackened wrist.

"My boy," said Dumbledore, and Sirius to his surprise found that he wanted to blink away tears, just at the sound of his old Headmaster's familiar voice. “My dear boy. You had us all very worried.”

"Albus," said Sirius, forcing himself to struggle with the wizard's first name. It had been far easier for him to adjust to *Minerva* than to Albus. "You look—ill."

His mother would have hexed him for such a rude comment, and indeed Sirius could not help but flick a hesitant glance to the left, where his mother hung imperiously outside the door. But Albus only smiled ruefully, folding one hand over the other, so Sirius could not get a good glimpse at the blackened injury that Albus obtained during Sirius' coma. "Old age catches up to us all, my boy. But I am so pleased to see you looking well. Remus has been serious—or rather, he's been taking his caretaking duties seriously, I should say."

Albus’ eyes twinkled; of course, the opportunity for a pun, laid so nicely at Sirius' feet. But Sirius found he couldn't quite summon up the energy to make a joke, not when Albus looked so clearly exhausted. Instead, he narrowed his eyes at Albus and said evenly, “Remus says there is a lot of movement in the werewolf tribes down south."

For a second, Albus was still, and Sirius catches something like sadness flickering through his old Headmaster's blue eyes. "I had hoped to sit here once more with you, old friend, and speak of nothing more than our memories."

Sirius frowned, uneasy both at the words and the implications thereof. It was true that during the first year of Sirius' forced tenure in Grimmauld, Albus had come often, and he and Sirius had spent many hours speaking fondly of the Order, of James and Lily and Alice and Frank, and the rest of them. But Sirius had always thought those nights had been for *him*, an attempt by Albus to conjure the ghosts of the past to motivate Sirius to keep going.

"Albus—"

"But you are right, and we do not have the time to spare," Albus continued, and the sadness in his eyes was blinked away, to be replaced by the general's gleam that had always reminded Sirius of his own father, stern and calculating. "I have tasked Remus with investigating the movements of the Dark creatures, including but not limited to the werewolves. I believe Amos' murder indicates that Voldemort is prioritising recruiting the creatures more in this war than in the last.”

Sirius frowned. “Why?” Voldemort had recruited some werewolves and trolls and hags in the last war, and giants, if the *Prophet* were to be believed, and perhaps a few vampires. But as far as Sirius could remember, these creatures had served primarily to inculcate a spreading feeling of fear, like the monsters under the bed were everywhere—yet had not posed a particular *threat*, at least not more of a threat than the Death Eaters themselves, the slimy bastards.

Albus gave a weighty shrug, and Sirius almost expected to hear the wizard’s bones creaking with the effort. His stomach flipped uncomfortably and he took a savage sip of tea to quell his anxiety. Albus looked as tired as the rest of them, but perhaps Albus had looked like this in the last war, and Sirius had been too oblivious to notice. Much had missed Sirius' notice last time. “Something has pointed his attention toward them. Fenrir Greyback, perhaps, or a delegation from the Eastern vampire clans. Remus has instructions to find out what he can.”

“I can go with him,” Sirius insisted, and because he was watching for it, he saw the small rueful smile that briefly crossed Albus’ lips. “I *can*, Albus. You said that Scrimgeour is the Minister, right? He’s a reasonable wizard, from what I remember. Tell him to push through my pardon, and then I’ll be free to leave this bloody house and be of some use to you.”

“You are of tremendous use to me, my boy—”

“Albus, I want to *fight*,” Sirius snarled, realising belatedly that he had leapt to his feet without noticing. He felt a great rush of anger for how quietly Dumbledore sat there, how stooped the old wizard seemed in his patterned blue robes and twinkling half-moon glasses, how easily Dumbledore had written him off entirely. “I know that you and Remus and the rest of them all think I’m too *delicate* to be out there, but I should be out there, with Remus, protecting Harry.”

Albus looked up at him, and the small half-smile that had so incensed Sirius grew, leaving Sirius feeling unsettled and unsteady. He disguised the motion by crossing to the other side of the room, pouring a generous helping of his father’s finest brandy into his cup, and then turning as if to offer it to Albus, though of course Albus rarely drank anything other than tea.

“Just a splash,” Albus said, to Sirius’ surprise, and this somehow made him feel even worse than before. He mutely Levitated the decanter over to Albus and returned silently to his chair. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Sirius. An old man deserves his comforts.”

“You’re not old.”

“I really am,” Albus said calmly, and Sirius took a furious sip of his tea to forestall anything that may come out of his mouth. He oughtn’t be so damned *angry* at Albus, and he tried to breathe calmly through his nose as Remus had taught him, counting to five between each inhale. He was not angry at Albus, he reminded himself forcibly. He was angry at the situation. He was an adult, and he could have adult feelings, and verbalise them as an adult would.

Sirius strove for the sort of reasonable tone that Remus always managed to produce when confronted by a professor. James had never needed to develop such a tone, and neither had Sirius, for their irrepressible grins and good cheer had proved to be equally effective, but

Sirius had not been able to summon up a smile in quite some time. “There is no need for me to wait out the war in Grimmauld Place, Albus. I don’t need to go to the werewolves, but I can be of use. If the war is as bad as everyone has been saying, we’ll need every man we’ve got.”

"So few," agreed Albus, and the strange, wistful waver in his voice raised the hairs on the back of Sirius' neck. He looked down at his cup and was surprised to see it already empty. "So few of us left, and so little time left to act. Yes, my dear boy. We will need every wand we can muster in this fight."

"It seems different this time," Sirius said cautiously. "The war."

He didn't state the obvious, and neither did Albus: that Sirius had been younger, in the last war, barely older than Harry was now, and he had possessed his friends and his courage in equal measure. He stared fixedly at the crackle and snap of the enchanted flames as he waited anxiously for Albus to reply. Albus would know what he meant, that the war this time felt just *too* out of reach, too quiet and contained and yet too deadly to be stamped out. This war seemed to have no need for young, passionate wizards, for Sirius and James to spend all night crouched behind a series of enchanted dustbins, just to hear the latest news from the furtive Death Eater meeting in the grimy pub in Knockturn Alley, or for Lily and Alice to create a crackling set of wards for the Hogs Head, where the Order used to gather before Albus and Aberforth's falling out. When Tonks talked about her war, she did so with quiet, cautious words, not with loud, emphatic statements, and the Order was so *old*, save for all the Weasley boys and their cheerful energy.

From below, Sirius could just make out the sounds of Kreacher clearing up in the parlour, undoubtedly scrubbing every floorboard where Albus had stepped with a pail of dirty water. It was quite audible, and Sirius felt sure that Kreacher had left all of the doors open so that Albus would hear him go to the effort. Sirius rolled his eyes but without heat. Kreacher, like all of them, needed an enemy to fight, a battle that would make their lives feel just marginally less useless.

"There is no easy way for me to say what I must," Albus said. Sirius recoiled from the expression on his face, more searing than the fire had been moments prior. "Sirius, my boy—I must apologise before I begin, for what I am about to do to you. Please remember that, when you think of me."

"Albus—" Sirius began nervously.

"Voldemort is immortal," Albus said, and because Sirius was listening so carefully, he noticed as the house flexed and groaned in response, as if they were indeed on a ship and had been nearly pitched into the black and inky sea. Sirius sat back in his chair and stared at Albus. Below, even Kreacher seemed to cease his pattering, as if the world had stopped its turning, and they were at the centre of a storm.

"What—what do you mean?"

Albus smiled thinly. "He is immortal, Sirius. He has made himself immortal. At the end of Harry’s first year, he made off with the Philosopher's Stone."

"So we must destroy that," Sirius said, perched on the edge of his chair. "Surely Flamel—"

"And he has made himself six Horcruxes, as insurance," said Albus, and Sirius was silenced again. “So my dear boy, I'm afraid my mission for you is far more serious than Remus’." Once again Sirius let the opportunity for a pun wither and disappear. He sat up alertly in his chair, listening intently as Albus opened his mouth and began to outline an impossible thing.

Horcruxes. That was a word that Sirius was able to recall after only a few seconds of searching through his memory, and his magic sparked fearfully around him as he understood at once the implication of what Albus had discovered. Voldemort had discovered Horcruxes at a young age, and created so many of them that to destroy them all would be nearly impossible. He would never die, and they would always live in fear of him.

“You understand what a Horcrux is,” Albus said slowly, when Sirius had heard most of Albus’ suspicions without reacting further in surprise. Sirius’ stomach felt tight and upset, but his face was impassive. "You have heard this word before."

Unbidden, Sirius shivered; he had a dream-memory, a vague memory, Uncle Pollux and Uncle Castor experimenting with an animal’s corpse in the upstairs room, the overwhelming stench of blood and decaying flesh, their twin scowls when they discovered he was hiding in the alcove to watch, one of their agonised screams…

“Yes,” he said hoarsely. “I know what a Horcrux is. Voldemort has split his soul, so that he cannot die.” He shuddered again, but this time in revulsion, and somewhere inside him, Padfoot whined in sympathy. His mind felt very clear and very alert, and he batted away his horror as if it were a dust-mite lingering in the air. “We must destroy them all."

Now he understood why Albus had come, why Albus looked so ancient and tired. So their enemy had transformed himself into an unspeakable being, had achieved what even the Darkest wizards of Sirius' line had only dreamt of, had scattered his soul across the world…

Sirius' parents had bound themselves to a half-wizard, and they had dragged Regulus into the madness, and Bella too…

Had Narcissa inscribed His Mark on her arm? Sirius thought suddenly of Voldemort's soul dipping into his and flinched violently in revulsion, his mouth dry. He would not have followed the Dark Lord for his persecution of Muggles, for his relentless, angered violence, and for the sticky stain of his magic…but the Dark Lord’s agenda aside, Sirius could not even begin to imagine being in his presence, knowing what he had done…he could not imagine subjecting himself to a monster, to a torn and diseased soul…

Had Bella *known?* Had she been impressed by his accomplishments, or had she too felt revulsion? She would have remembered their uncles…she would have known what a Horcrux would do to a wizard, even the strongest wizard of their time…and *Regulus*...

“You see why the werewolves are only one concern of mine,” said Albus dryly, taking a sip of his laced tea. "Nicholas assures me that the Stone will do nothing for Voldemort, though it is a dangerous aid for him to have its power. It does not confer immortality as Voldemort may have believed. The Horcruxes are the more pressing threat."

Sirius smiled without humour. He knew now why Albus had come to *him*. Sirius had always been a bit ashamed of his Dark heritage, of the house elf heads on the wall, that he had learned Occlumency before he knew to write with a quill, that he still knew six Dark curses to every Light spell. Horcruxes were created from the Darkest magic that their world knew, and Sirius could not even begin to imagine how Dark the magic would be to destroy them. It could require his life, or his soul in return, and Albus had come here to ask him an impossible favour.

“I will do it,” Sirius promised fiercely, so that Albus would not have to debase himself to ask, and the dissonant clang in his breast was replaced by an exultant burn when Albus lifted his head and stared at him with such pride and such sorrow that Sirius felt seventeen again, powerful and victorious. He felt steady on his feet, as if the waters had stilled, and he was at the helm. Perhaps this war was not very different after all from the last after all. “I will hunt them down and destroy them, Albus.”

"You have always been one of my brightest stars," Albus replied solemnly, and Sirius straightened under his gaze as the responsibility settled around his shoulders. "I am sorry to leave you with a burden such as this, my boy, but I cannot trust anyone else. Harry will need you for what lies ahead. All of the Horcruxes must be destroyed, even those whose identities we do not yet know. *All* of them."

"I will," Sirius promised again. Then, he raised his head and allowed himself the only doubt he would entertain. "Albus, do you think—do you think it can be done?"

"I do not know," admitted Albus. "They must be destroyed beyond magical repair, and doubtless Voldemort has protected them with terrible magic."

"But," Sirius prompted, at Albus' pause.

Albus smiled at Sirius, a fond smile, as if Sirius were once again sitting in his office in order to insincerely apologise for one of his pranks. Sirius had spent far longer discussing magical theory with Albus than discussing his punishments, even as a boy. Albus had the same impish sparkle in his eyes now as he'd had then as he responded, "But Voldemort, for all his strengths, never understood very much about love, Sirius. Not as you do, and not as those close to you did. Lily and James protected their son and gave him into your care. You must always remember your love for him."

Sirius caught Albus' gaze. "James was changed, you know, by Harry," he said quietly, remembering those strange, glimmering days after Harry’s birth, the gossamer web of hope that had so briefly bound all of them together, even Peter. "James was terrified—but the type of terrified that was good for him, I think."

"Not much scared our young James," Albus agreed, and Sirius knew that Albus understood what he'd meant. It had been good for James to fear for another. Lily had been so ferocious that though James ran around her, delighted and watchful, he had never feared for her, not in the same way that he would have felt a sharp stab of painful terror when he stared into the eyes of his son.

Sirius had felt that, before. During his cursed sleep, he had dreamed often of one day in particular where Regulus had leaned impishly out of the fourth story window and Sirius had watched, bound by the rug slithering over his feet, as his brother had tipped himself toward the ground.

Magic-born, magic-saved, whispered the house, and indeed Regulus had been unharmed.

Yet Sirius always remembered the feeling of the rug over his bare feet, and the guilty relief that he had been trapped, so that he would not have to confront the fact that he may not have been able to run to Regulus in time, or the knowledge that he had not watched over his brother as he ought to have. He had been bizarrely grateful to the house, even as he'd dreamed for many nights of being strangled slowly to death, suffocating under the weight of those rugs, buried beneath the floorboards.

He is in your care, their mother had told Sirius, softly and solemnly, just as James had told Sirius when he had appointed him Harry's legal godfather, hours after Harry's birth.

"That fear is yours, now," Albus said quietly.

For the next few hours, they discussed in detail what Albus had found: a Gaunt family ring, that Albus had destroyed…the diary of a teenaged Voldemort…Hufflepuff's Cup, and the fabled Locket of Slytherin, and the serpent that slithered at Voldemort's feet…

When Sirius slept, that night, he dreamed of a glint of gold in a large stone cave and the flash of dragon-fire and the still deep waters of an enchanted pond—vines curling over his arms, and a statue carved into the stone walls of a cave and a whole row of gravestones in a cold, snowy yard—and he woke feeling tired and exhilarated and more alive than in years.

***

June 1997 // six months remaining

Pollux and Castor Black were jointly the middle children, second to Orion yet older than Alphard. The Black family at the time had slid into the kind of indolence that often precedes a great upset, and the twins were left to their own devices more often than not. Orion spent hours each day at his father's heels, dreaming of his own lineage, and Alphard, perhaps to compensate, spent his time with their mother, but the twins had each other, and that proved to be more than enough.

Twins in the wizarding world were not uncommon, yet they were often viewed with apprehension. Castor and Pollux decided early on to be interchangeable and always together, perhaps each understanding that their individual power was not great, yet their magic flowed smoothly through and from each other's bodies when needed. Their years in Hogwarts were

not marked by any particular occasion—the power struggle between Orion and Alphard served as the primary source of entertainment for the Dark wizarding families, and few thought of the brothers in between—yet many would have done well to watch them more closely, to inquire after the dirt that caked their fingernails, the scratches that marred their creamy white arms, and the wild light that flared briefly from their matching grey eyes when challenged.

For Tom Riddle was not the only Hogwarts student to dive into the murky depths of his heritage. The Black family were Sacred Twenty Eight—and so were the Weasleys, but nobody ducked out of the way of any of their paths, nor shuddered to meet any of their eyes, not at least until Percy Weasley was rumoured to kneel at the Dark Lord's feet. No, there was something about the Blacks, some murkiness to their magic, some edge to their smiles, that made people instinctively uneasy, and that Pollux and Castor delighted in and claimed for their own.

They were not interested in *magic*, or at least, not in the type of magic that was taught within the halls of Hogwarts. Their grades were perfectly respectable, and they attended their classes silently and diligently. Yet what interested them was the wild and fey power they sensed lurking beneath their feet when they crossed the Hogwarts grounds, but they agreed early on that it could not *quite* be called magic. Elemental power, perhaps, a power that called for them, a power that some families foolishly called the *Old Ways*, as if that power were not still alive and ready to be tamed. The only thing old about that power were the folks who tried to placate it with silly sacrifices of magic and farm animals, as if magic of the type that had slept underfoot for millenia would be satisfied with a rabbit or a goat and rote, tired incantations.

Still. The Black family would not have maintained its standing if its children did not recognise power when they felt it calling to them, and if Castor and Pollux were suspiciously docile for middle children, it would have behoved their parents to ask what occupied them instead.

***

For the first time, Sirius was pleased, defiantly so, that he had the Black family library sitting creakily upstairs.

Horcrux, from the old Warlock tongue *Hor,* split, and *crux*, vessel. Sirius had never been the most studious of the Marauders, but he had achieved high marks in all of the classes that he had cared about, and was second only to James in the Auror Academy training cohort before he dropped out to join the Order. Within a week, he'd torn through half of the library, dismantling curses on the old moaning books without even a flinch, and piling up references and cross-references and dusty old tomes on a side table that his aunt had once used to demonstrate to the young Black children how to use Imperius on a rat.

There had been twelve known cases of Horcruxes used to extend a life, though the book that Sirius read cautioned there could be dozens more, that these half-dead half-souls could be walking among the very brightest of society. Sirius rolled his eyes, scanned the list of reported Horcrux creators (all Dark wizards, all before the thirteenth century) and tossed that book to the floor, where it cried out piteously.

"Master is wanting assistance?" Kreacher asked querulously, and Sirius flapped his hand angrily, his mind already buzzing. If nobody had (publicly) made a Horcrux since the thirteenth century…how had Voldemort even learned of such a thing? Albus had mentioned that Slughorn had come to him, wide-eyed and shaking, to sorrowfully admit that he'd mentioned the word once to a young Tom Riddle…but Sirius had suffered through Slughorn as a professor too. The man didn't have the stomach to debone his own sloth-beetles. Sirius couldn't imagine he'd told Voldemort anything he hadn't already known. Riddle was probably merely seeking someone to blame, if anyone were to ever discover his ambitions, so that nobody thought to question where he had truly learned the term. Sirius and James had performed similar ruses before themselves, primarily to hide the knowledge they gleaned from the Marauder's Map.

Sirius had never been particularly curious about Tom Riddle, and he did not begin to be now. After exhausting the library's references to those twelve alleged Dark wizards, Sirius set aside the question of Tom and thought instead only of Voldemort. It did not matter who had told Riddle the secrets he longed to know…if Albus thought Voldemort had created six Horcruxes, then Sirius was sure that Voldemort had found the truth somewhere. Many of the Dark wizards Sirius had known had their own private repositories of knowledge.

Who had Voldemort *killed*? He'd killed so many. How did Albus know the world was not teeming with Voldemort's Horcruxes, one for each of his victims? Had he made a Horcrux with James' death, or Lily's, or poor Rosanne Brown's, who had been Sirius' first kiss and Peter's first girlfriend? Had *Peter* known about this, the little rat? Perhaps he had led Voldemort straight to James not just because of the prophecy, but because with James' death, Voldemort could keep himself alive. But James had killed himself, though killed to protect his family and his friends. Perhaps he did not count as an *innocent*, not in the way the book required.

(***Purity is power***, whispered the house gleefully, and Sirius shivered and turned the page).

He began making a list, all of Voldemort's known victims during the first war. There had been so *many*, and there were so many familiar names, names he had not thought of for so many years. Molly's two brothers, for instance, or Aurelia Vance, who had once dumped her vial of eyelets into Sirius' lap during Potions when he'd snickered at her poor attempt at a Strengthening Solution. The name of each victim seemed to imprint itself on Sirius' mind, and he thought of them nearly constantly, when he wasn't thinking about Voldemort. Any of their poor, tragic deaths could have been—corrupted. It sickened him.

Sirius snapped at Tonks when she turned up, grimy and sporting both a deep bruise and an expression of great satisfaction, not having the time to hear her latest report from the Academy. Now he quite agreed with Albus; there was truly only one mission of import, and it

had been given to him, and he would not squander that gift of trust with frivolity, despite what others may think he was inclined to do.

"There's no need to be a git, Sirius," Tonks responded, affronted. In the (wary, expectant) silence of the house after she left, Sirius turned back eagerly to the book he had been closely examining, which detailed in explicit detail why an *innocent* was needed, rather than merely anyone…

In the last Order meeting that Sirius would ever attend, he sat quietly in the back, stirring with impatience as each member gave their updates in slow, sonorous tones. He did not *care* about the Aurors, or the werewolves, nor even the plot to fake the Minister's death, an elaborate affair dreamt up by Tonks and one of her partners in the Ministry. None of it mattered, none of it, while Voldemort was out there living on time he stole from his victims…

(Kreacher, watching his master consume the books in the upstairs library, whined quietly and pulled at one of his long ears. He remembered another Black reading these very same books, and he had not been able to help Master Regulus then, but he thought guiltily to himself that perhaps he could help Master Sirius now. If Sirius found that the books he had *just* been reading were in a jumbled order the next day, or that his notes were more smeared than he remembered, or his inkwell dry—he did not suspect his house elf, given Sirius was well used to a house that meddled in his affairs, but Kreacher felt sick all the same, as if stepping precariously over the edge, a fly beating its wings against the thick sticky web that ensnared it).

And then, Albus' death.

Upon hearing the news, Sirius went cold, so cold that it was as if he were back in Azkaban, sitting in one of the dreary, draughty cells, hearing the low constant moan of the other prisoners…feeling the wet sludge between his bare toes and the cold metal cot underneath his bruised limbs, hearing the soft scraping of the Dementor's hands against the wizard-made doors…inside his stomach was the same despair, the all-consuming fog of hopelessness that curled softly around Sirius' mind, a despair so damp and heavy that even Padfoot offered only minimal protections…and despite himself he felt again a shadow of the wish that flared brightly in his breast each night, that he may lay down to sleep to join those who had left him, combated only by his searing rage at the traitorous rat…rage, deep rage, was the only thing that drove him to open his eyes, to blink and to draw in air through his chest…

"Sirius," said Remus, hesitantly, and Sirius lifted his eyes laboriously from where he had been staring at his clenched hands. Remus was the only person still alive who would know what Albus had done for him, how he had saved Sirius from a fate worse than death…

"I'll kill him," Sirius said calmly, in a voice he did not recognise, though the portraits on the wall sat up and took notice, and in the hallway Kreacher exchanged a look with his old mistress. Remus flinched and then peered closely at Sirius, who could not blame him for his scrutiny; his oldest living friend would have ample cause to believe that Sirius would be raging and storming and crying, slamming doors and pursuing Snape by any means necessary.

But Sirius was older, now. Sirius was older, and he had a godson, and a task laid to him by Albus and James, and he would not fail either of them, not again, not now. Not when such a monster walked in their world, and Sirius was the only person who knew of it.

“When the war is done,” Sirius promised, and something flared inside him in recognition of the vow. “I will kill Severus Snape, and I will avenge Albus’ death.”

"Don't do *anything,*" Remus barked, and the mistrustful, chiding edge in his tone surprised them both. The candlesticks straightened and firmed in their old brass holdings on the wall, and a few even flickered, briefly, as Sirius instinctively processed the threat that Remus meant to pose to him.

"Yes, sir," said Sirius mockingly, and Remus bared his teeth nearly in a snarl. It did not faze Sirius, though it saddened him. He had always seen more of Remus than the others, in the same way that he had been treated to glimpses of James that his friend had otherwise kept secret. Sirius had been the first of them all to discover Remus' secret, and he'd been the first to feel fear of who Remus was, which he blamed for the rest of his life for the strange mistrustful tension that at times strummed quietly between them. In return, Remus had felt more comfortable around him, more ready to allow the wolf to leap out of his carefully repressed exterior. James had always been too—clean for the type of world that both Sirius and Remus emerged from, even at eleven. "Going to restart your nightly rounds, are you?"

Remus' eyes flashed amber, but with a deep steadying breath, he stepped forward and laid a hand on Sirius' shoulder, ignoring the flinch. Had Sirius seen himself in Remus' eyes, perhaps he would have understood the mingled pain and exasperation and thin, steady wariness that shone through despite Remus' sorrow for his oldest friend. Yet he could not, and so he only could breath in the familiar scent of Remus' favourite tea and his Muggle cologne and feel suddenly abashed.

"Albus was important to us all," said Remus softly. "But I know what he meant to you."

He had seen Sirius when Sirius needed to be seen as something other than his family's heir, and he had seen Sirius when Sirius had needed to be seen as precisely that. It did not shame Sirius to know that Remus remembered Albus in this way too. "He saved my life, Moony," Sirius whispered helplessly, and Remus drew him into a hug, the comforting press of his body blazingly warm, indicating even to the grieving Sirius that the full moon would be soon.

"You're not alone, Padfoot," Remus said firmly, his voice muffled by Sirius' hair. Sirius was glad that Remus could not see the rueful smile that crossed automatically over his face; resignation that Remus knew precisely what Sirius feared, sorrow that Remus had to remain unaware of what Albus had laid at Sirius’ feet.

Somehow, it was this last thought that gave Sirius the strength to step away from his friend and straighten his chin. Had Albus wanted to tell Remus of the Horcruxes—or Alastor, or Minerva, or Kingsley, or any of them—then he would have, and he would have told Sirius how to utilise their skills. That he had tasked Remus instead with investigating the werewolves, and Alastor and Tonks with the Muggleborn escape routes, and Minerva with the safety of Hogwarts suggested to Sirius that he had kept the secret a secret intentionally,

and Sirius did not blame him. If Remus were to be captured, it would make it far worse for him to have this secret in his mind, to have any secret in his mind, and Sirius was the only one to have an impenetrable vault to hide in, unseen. A ghost upon this world.

A ghost that is going to kill you, Lord Voldemort, he thought to himself, and unbidden, a strange, hostile smile twisted his tired face, and Remus narrowed his eyes at it suspiciously.

Though Remus looked at him cautiously, though he insisted on sleeping in Grimmauld that night, though each member of the Order made their sorrowful way into the house over the next few days, one by one—*checking up on me,* an ugly voice snarled in Sirius' head—Sirius managed to keep his word.

He did not leave Grimmauld, not even when Minerva organised a private wake the week after Albus' death for members of the Order who would not be able to attend the actual funeral.

He did not charge off to murder Snape, even when he heard more of the details of Albus' final moments in an awful tear-soaked letter from Harry. *Please*, Albus had said, and something inside Sirius' heart clenched painfully and did not unwind.

He did not even research the Horcruxes, not now, not when he had a much more important task, one set to him nearly seventeen years ago by an uncharacteristically sombre James Potter, a task that had characterised Sirius' every move since it was assigned to him for life.

Keep Harry safe, asked James, and Sirius nodded fiercely and promised yet again that he would.

***

Grimmauld Place was the designated base of the Black family, designated legally and magically, and generations of Blacks had added their protections to it until it was a veritable stronghold. Potter Manor had once been the same, yet James and Lily had chosen not to wall themselves inside, trusting instead to the Fidelius Charm and their closest friends. Sirius had never understood James' decision, and he had argued against it bitterly, with all the experience of his youth. If James had called upon the great family protections, had given his magic to the soil and demanded safety for his blood in return, then even the great Lord Voldemort would have found it difficult to make his way inside.

Sirius had always suspected that James had thought that the Potter Manor would not protect Lily, though by forsaking her Muggle last name and binding herself to the family, Lily would have been considered a Potter by magic, if not by blood. James had never said such a thing out loud, and of course had he even insinuated to Lily that their son would have been safer inside his family abode, Lily would have thrust Harry into his arms and insisted they leave her on the perimeter of the wards to fend for herself. Sirius could not think of any other reason why James would refuse to return to his childhood home after his parents' deaths; James had been happy there, and Sirius too, for that blessed year before his majority. Potter

Manor was clean and well-lit and full of bright, sunny rooms, and the magic sang gleefully between the open doors and sparked playfully at the hearths.

No, James had said, and perhaps Sirius had been too young to notice how James' fingers had tensed, his palm splaying grotesquely by his side. James was an heir, too—the *only* heir, and his neck prickled uncomfortably at the thought of his infant son laying so vulnerably in the midst of that fierce, bright sun.

It was nothing so plebeian as houses turning against their heirs, or that houses could be unfriendly, or that the magic that trailed sluggishly behind the bare or booted feet of its occupants dripped slowly into the ground and languished there, bored, or that all power, in the old way, was a *give* and a *take* and the modern wizards had forgotten that a cost had once been required, or even that anything was more sentient than it ought to be.

It was none of that, yet there was a somewhat modern tradition of young witches and wizards building their new homes on untilled land, a patch of grass not yet marred by the footsteps of wizards. It was Arthur and Molly Weasley and the dozen other families that discovered Ottery St. Catchpole establishing their families there, and the Potters living in the shadow of the Dumbledores rather than out in the country, and the Gaunts stubbornly holding onto their ancestral land even as it crumbled into a shack. It was Orion raising his two young boys in the same house that he had been born in, though he ought to have known better.

It was none of that, yet it was all of it, too, and both Sirius and James knew it, somewhere in the back of their minds.

A give and a take.

***

"No," said Sirius, when Harry arrived at Grimmauld Place with two others in tow.

Harry gave a look to the others that Sirius could not quite name; if anything, he would guess it was perhaps relief, followed by disappointment. Sirius crossed his arm and waited.

"I'm not leaving Harry's side," vowed Ron.

"Molly would kill me if I whisked you away," Sirius responded, unmoving. "And your mother and I do not always see eye to eye in the best circumstances."

Ron swelled indignantly, and Sirius wanted to smile despite the horror of it all, just in recognition of those same ruffled feathers he had seen on James a million times. He was glad that Harry had found a friend in Ron, but Sirius had to keep Harry safe. He could not waver for sentimentality.

Hermione stepped forward and straightened her back, her chin lifted firmly. “I’ve removed all of my parents’ memories and sent them to Australia,” she said crisply. “So I’ve nowhere to go, if you turn me out. Given that I’m likely to be the most prominent Mudblood target, to leave me to fend for myself would be akin to killing me yourself.”

“Hermione!” Ron and Harry chorused in twin, shocked tones. Sirius narrowed his eyes at Hermione, who stared placidly back. He had never spoken very much to Hermione, and in truth had no real frame of reference for her, aside for perhaps Narcissa, who was the only other witch in Sirius’ life who had ever achieved the same glacial pragmatism, though never through words as bluntly spoken.

“We’re not leaving his side,” Hermione added firmly, and Sirius’ nostrils flared in irritation of what he would have to say next.

“Fine.”

In the end, Ron got his way too, if only because he pointed out that his father had agreed to the plan, and because of the way that Harry looked at Sirius eagerly when he sensed his godfather wavering.

Ron wouldn’t be safe out there either, not as the known best friend of Harry Potter, and Sirius supposed reluctantly that both members of the Golden Trio had already had ample opportunity to desert Harry, if they so desired. *They aren’t Peter*, he reminded himself firmly, and the Azkaban tattoo on his upper shoulder twinged painfully.

The wards that Sirius brought down on the house were the type of wards that lived in the back of his head, even during his years in Azkaban, that nestled in the hollow of his collarbone and lined the ridges of his back. Black magic, family magic, magic that came to his aid when he summoned it, magic without an incantation or a wand movement, magic of the blood. He banished the teenagers to Kreacher's dubious care and stood in the kitchen, where his pull to the house felt the strongest, and filled his mind with his one overwhelming desire.

Nobody shall enter.

Upstairs, the portraits shifted and murmured to each other uneasily, and the elf heads shook themselves awake, craning their necks to see their master more clearly, and umbrellas clattered to the floor as the troll leg took a hesitant step forward. As Sirius breathed deeply and summoned his magic, the windows steadied themselves against the chill outside, and the doors grew protective vines across their keyholes, and the staircase memorised the feel of the five occupants inside.

Grimmauld Place awakened, and it sang to Sirius, who pushed back with his magic. *Nobody shall enter*, he intoned, and he forced the house to quell its petulant protest. The house wanted more people; more magic. It called to Andromeda, who scratched uneasily at her shoulders, and Tonks, who faltered in the middle of a cleaning charm. It wailed plaintively across Britain to Narcissa and Draco, who exchanged a wide-eyed, silent look across the table but did not speak. Even Ron and the other Weasleys felt a faint shudder, and Harry flinched in surprise at the sensation of cool water dripping down his back.

I am the Black heir, ordered Sirius, and he luxuriated in the stream of his own magic, and the magic of everyone who shared his blood. Their cruelty and their magic and their blood buried in small vials beneath the floor were all accessible at his fingertips. *I am the heir to this house and it will serve only me.*

The magic seemed to build and swell, and Harry and his friends found that they were sweating. The growling furnace of Sirius' will threatened to spill out of the kitchen and burn them to a crisp, and even Kreacher flicked an uneasy glance below him as he positioned himself in the doorway to prevent anyone from interfering with Master Sirius.

The wolf, sang the house, and Sirius faltered, suddenly, as he smelled the spice of Remus' tea, and recalled the warmth of his hug. Remus was fierce and capable and kind, and he *knew* Sirius, knew him as nobody else did.

The house shifted petulantly. It liked the wolf and the damp earthy feel of its magic. Some of the creatures in the wall were strengthened by the wolf's breaths; others comforted by his potential for savagery. Yet the house knew Sirius better than the wolf, and when the house felt his will firming, it tried again.

They'll find us, Sirius!

No they won't, Reg, stop being such a baby about everything.

Sirius swallowed and turned his attention away from the memory of his poor traitor brother. Regulus had chosen a side. The house did not know him as well as it thought if it believed an image of his brother would cause him to waver.

(Or perhaps the house knew more than Sirius, knew another Black boy with stormy grey eyes, had absorbed another child's tears into the matted black carpet. Perhaps the house had caught upon Regulus' image during Sirius' long sleep and sensed when to use it for its own whims.)

This house will obey me, and this house will find me worthy, and this house will protect me until I say otherwise!

An endless, soaring tension, a rushing in his ears, a deep cold in his lower breast, where a Dementors had once touched him with a tentative, skeletal hand…

Then, release.

The house accepted Sirius' dominance and settled with a grumble, and the house elf heads creakily returned to their positions, and the portraits were once again free to visit each other's frames. Narcissa and Draco relaxed, and Tonks shook out the cramp in her hand, and Arthur Weasley blinked blurrily at the ceiling before turning over to return to sleep, his heart beating anxiously in an attempt to keep himself alive.

Sirius was sweating, and he felt exultantly alive, and his hands were still grasped around the power that had flowed through his palms. He thought suddenly of Bella with fondness, or at

least satisfaction. Bella and he had always been the most powerful, and now it was just him left.

"Take that, old Snakeface," Sirius spit out, and he surprised himself with a fierce grin.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter has some more action. Do you guys like these shorter chapters? For ASOR I aimed for ~30 pages per chapter; these are more like 10-15.

Thanks to all who reviewed! I am trying out a new-ish writing style (more third person, less locked into Sirius' vantage point, past tense, more meandering rather than plot driven) so appreciate feedback on how it's going. As always, feel free to point out spelling/grammar errors and I will fix when I can.

Searching

Chapter Notes

Again: my Black family tree is wrong. I know it is. But for the purposes of my story, we have:

Cygnus Black as the father of Orion, Castor, Pollux, and Alphard.
Orion Black as the father of Sirius and Regulus.
Druella Black as the mother of Bella, Narcissa, and Andromeda.

Thanks to all who left kudos and their thoughts!

Chapter 3: Searching

Sirius had hosted Harry and his friends before, namely that one swift summer and then again during that horridly wonderful Christmas where Arthur's recovery forced his children to seek shelter in Grimmauld. He knew Ron and Hermione, though not well, primarily through the glimpses of Harry's letters. And Harry—he did not *know* Harry as well as he'd like, considering he'd been in prison for much of Harry's life, and for most of these past few years he was forced to correspond with his godson primarily by letters, and Harry had never been the most reliable at sending post. Yet by the same token, Sirius had watched over Harry as a child, and known his parents better than he'd known himself, and had hidden in a clearing in the Forbidden Forest for nearly an entire year just to catch the briefest glimpses of Harry as he walked to Herbology with his friends. He did not know Harry, but he loved him without reserve, and in many ways, that was what Harry needed from Sirius more than anything else, though neither understood that in so many words.

To have Harry all to himself, without scores of Weasleys and Order members to distract him…to see his face, pale and sorrowful and searching for answers in Sirius' face over the breakfast table…to wake in the middle of the night to hear Harry's quiet movements as he paced sleeplessly, and to sit on the edge of his bed like Sirius had always imagined his own father might, and to bring him a cup of steaming chamomile tea, the only thing that had comforted Regulus after he'd been punished…

It felt like a gift, and Sirius clutched it close to his chest, and tried not to think of everyone who would need to use Grimmauld as a refuge, and especially not of Remus. For the first two weeks, Sirius did nothing at all save for spending time with his godson and welcoming his two friends into his home. They told stories of Hogwarts and they attempted to learn the few Muggle recipes that Hermione had picked up from her parents and they cleaned the bathroom and they gravitated to the parlour where Albus' spell still allowed fire to spark up in the otherwise unfriendly grate.

Do not harm them, he ordered the house, and the house subsided with a grumble. It was Ron's idea to have Sirius formally designate them as guests, though Ron presumably suggested it more to quell Kreacher's rebellious mutterings rather than in response to the house's eager air. Sirius was surprised to hear the suggestion from Ron, but Ron explained with a shrug that his Great Aunt Muriel had forced them all to participate in the ceremony when she had purchased a small cottage by the sea for her summer abode. Sirius had to search deep into his memory for the knowledge of how to do the same; his parents had not welcomed anyone formally as guests, at least, not that he could remember, and the portrait of his mother was less than helpful when he brought himself in reluctantly to ask.

Andy would have known how to do this, Sirius thought to himself guiltily as they arranged themselves in the foyer and the three teenagers knelt at his feet with a tinge of self-consciousness. Andromeda had assured him that she was not interested in owning the house, but Sirius could not help but think now that he was a fraud. Andromeda and Tonks ought to have lived here in the house, been protected by its wards, dripped their tears into the carpet and fed their magic into the wards…

A chuckle stirred the back of Sirius' mind, but he ignored it as he raised his arm and chanted the requisite spell, trying not to make eye-contact with Hermione, whose mingled look of interested scepticism was too similar to Sirius' own doubtful feelings for him to bear. He tensed instinctively, expecting the same type of stirring attention from the house that he had begun to recognise, somewhere in the back of his mind, but the wards were silent, and the spell ended without fanfare.

"Worth a try, anyhow," said Ron fairly, helping Hermione and then Harry up from their kneeling positions. "I always thought Auntie Muriel was a bit off it. Percy was always repeating what she said, though, so I thought it was worth a try." Ron winked at Hermione and then widened his eyes exaggeratedly. "*The Old Ways, Ron!"*

"There are recorded instances of old family magic, though," Hermione replied primly, back on more secure ground now that the house had not burnt her to a crisp for daring to ask for its clemency. "Magic that could not otherwise be explained, or magic not directly tied to an incantation of spell. Have you ever experienced that, Sirius?"

Sirius didn't meet her gaze. He had never *experienced it*, per se, but he had long suspected, though never voiced, that his Black inheritance lived like an unwelcome guest on the ridges of his shoulders. "No," he said, a tad too sharply. "It's all nonsense, all of it. We'll just have to bully Kreacher into being nicer to you, Hermione."

(If Percy Weasley had been there, he would have snottily informed Sirius that a *true* claiming of guests required more than just the incantation. Perhaps Ron had been too young to remember, but he had dripped some of his blood onto the wardstone in the corner of the Shell Cottage garden, unremarkable save for the strange gleam when the sun or moon hit the edges of the stone just right. The house was quiet, too; it did not want any more blood, or at least not *this* blood, and upstairs in the library, a book edged itself further out of sight).

Spell or no spell, Kreacher *was* nicer to Hermione, in no small part because Sirius had woken him in the middle of the night, dragging him out of his nest of rags, and threatened coldly to mount his head on the wall if he dared call Hermione a Mudblood again. Kreacher, still

blinking away sleep, thought for a minute that Master Orion had returned, and he stuttered out a shaking *yes Master* before he realised which Black was holding him around the neck.

Good, thought Kreacher fiercely, though he felt the wall behind him grow wet with displeasure. The Master Blacks *had* to be dangerous, otherwise all hope would be lost. Kreacher had seen it occur once, and he was not keen to see it occur again, even for this traitor son, who broke his mother's heart so cruelly all those years ago.

They all took up residence in their chosen rooms: Harry in the room opposite to Sirius, where the Black girls had built large, ethereal castles of curtains and lofted beds each time they visited their sullen male cousins; Hermione and Ron on the floor below, in the guest rooms opposite Regulus; and Sirius in the room he had slept in since birth. Ron claimed a chess set for his own, and Hermione asked Kreacher to purchase her new curtains, war be damned, because the dark heavy set in her room made her feel curiously drowsy and weak whenever she drew them against the grimy window. Harry made no changes to his room, the bunk beds of old having been long-since been replaced with a large iron bed where Remus often slept, and if he chose the room because of its proximity to Sirius' reassuring snore, he would never admit it out loud.

For the first two weeks there was peace, or something like it. For the first two weeks, Sirius did not think of the Horcruxes—only Harry, and the thumbprints of exhausted sorrow pressing into the spaces under his eyes. They played chess, and Sirius tested their shield charms, and he told them stories of James, and they spoke lightly of their adventures and ignored the spectre haunting them outside. Sirius came to learn that Ron liked Hermione but was too shy to tell her, and Harry spoke of Ginny with a flush around his neck that was all James, and Hermione was softer than she looked from the tough glint in her eye, particularly after she caught Sirius on one of his nighttime trips to Harry's room, mug in hand. (In these nighttime sessions, Sirius came to know Harry, too—to learn that he, like Lily, preferred tea to warm milk, that he had silent nightmares with his face screwed up in pain, that he never slept with his wand beneath his pillow, never having been told to by a paranoid older wizard).

First-born, first to fail, whispered the house, but Sirius ignored it. His mother had been the one to tell Regulus and Sirius solemnly to never anger the Black family magic, to treat it with respect, to wield it only for proper, powerful goals; their father never spoke to either of his sons about their heritage, save to inform them that they would be expected to carry on the legacy of their forefathers. Orion Black had not been frightened of anything, and he certainly had not been frightened of a mere *house*, regardless of whatever his fool younger brothers had told him that summer after their sixth year.

Orion Black had been an adult by then, nearly twenty-four and apprenticed to his father, Cygnus, who was in the process of purchasing and reselling all of the desirable property in the newly established Knockturn Alley. Many of the Blacks did not dirty their hand with actual *business*—the goblins were perfectly capable of investing their fortune for a series of small yet substantial fees—but Cygnus was born with the secret, lurking fear that his younger brother would seek to challenge his right to the title of *Lord Black*, and he wanted to establish his own private vault in case he needed additional resources. Orion had always felt this to be a particularly *weak* mindset, as if his father were publicly admitting to the possibility of defeat. Still, it was expected to help one's father, and Orion saw the sense of opening a vault

of his own, and after he bought himself a series of new robes with his own private money, he began to enjoy the side glances that cousin Walburga was giving him under her lashes when nobody else was watching.

(Others *were* watching, namely Walburga's mother and eldest sister, and they both approved highly of her strategy and schooled her in the best ways to increase its efficacy. Cousin Orion was a *tad* close on the family tree, but he was handsome and clear-headed and a far better catch than any of his brothers. Walburga had heard rumours that Orion was cruel, that he had dallied his way coolly through half of the girls in his year, though they had all promised their parents to maintain their purity, but she was newly seventeen and ready to be married, and she fancied herself equal to his harshness. It was not difficult to ensnare him; Orion never paid any particular attention to the female machinations that whirred behind his back, not as a child, and certainly not as an adult).

So when Castor and Pollux cornered him on the way back from Gringotts and demanded to speak to him, he was fingering a thick bag of Galleons and a small velvet case with a ring, thinking grandly of his future.

"There's a Dark magic there," Pollux had said, and Orion had laughed. It was a sound he was just beginning to grow into, though it would take Cygnus' death for Orion to achieve the proper hardness of countenance that gave the laugh its intended effect.

"The Blacks thrive on Dark magic, brother," he'd said, raising an eyebrow as Castor stepped forward.

"*A* Dark magic," Castor had corrected, his voice barely audible. "The Black family has paid a great cost for its power, Orion. You must watch yourself if you wish to be heir to this legacy."

"Even if I were not the heir, it would not be either of you, for Father would not risk splitting his heritage on twins," replied Orion, amused at this transparent attempt from his younger brothers. "Save your ghost stories for Alphard."

"We are more capable of taming its power than you, Orion."

"And the house is still ours by blood."

Orion's face had soured at this reminder of the ritual their parents forced them to perform each year, kneeling under the moon, holding out their palms as their father sliced into them with the heir-knife. ***I claim a wish for this family with the blood of my heirs***, his father would say, and Orion would bite down hard on his lip to prevent himself from crying out at the magic that would sear along the edges of the open wound. This ritual always seemed to hurt him more than his brothers. Alphard, who would break at the slightest punishment, would hold his palm out lightly, and neither of the twins seemed to experience anything other than the sudden pain of the knife sinking into their hands.

Your magic and your sacrifice and your gain, the knife would whisper to Orion, and he would steel himself against the pain, taking it as proof that he and he alone was destined to inherit the power of the Black family.

Orion Black would die four months before his son, but for a very different reason, and perhaps it was the magic's swelling sorrow at his death which took the life of Walburga two weeks later. Poor Regulus had to struggle under the weight of the Black wards for sixteen short weeks before he too succumbed to death, and the land underneath the house was left without a present heir for the first time for many generations.

Houses were not made to be empty. Houses were meant to be filled, whether by cruelty or kindness or something in between. They were made to be lived in; made to soften their edges against their occupants' footsteps, meant to be scuffed and rearranged and reorganised to fit a life as needed. They were meant to guard their people from the weather outside and the forces of evil that may threaten them. Houses had doors and locks, rooms that could be closed off, windows that could be shut. Insular; protective; *needed*.

Perhaps if Orion Black had sat Sirius and Regulus down and told them what he had learned during his four decades of being the Black family heir, they would have acted with caution, and neither would have returned to their childhood home when they needed a refuge from which to fight Voldemort. Perhaps it would have saved their lives. Perhaps Orion wanted to, but was unable to form the words, unable to speak past the weight that pressed on his chest each day, unable to gasp past the long-fingered hand that seemed to hold his throat hostage.

Perhaps if Castor and Pollux had been less ambitious, less confident, less attached to their family—more like Alphard, who walked away from the suffocating embrace of his family name, though admittedly did not stray far from the family money—they would have been able to see the situation with clearer eyes. Perhaps they would have been able to warn Orion more pointedly. Perhaps they would have saved themselves the next decade of life tied to Grimmauld, to the fruitless battle against the family curse.

(What Orion *did* do, despite it all, was to open a vault for his oldest son that was not attached to the main Black vault on the first floor of Gringotts, deep in its uneasy depths, and fill it with as much gold as he thought his reckless son would need. He blocked Sirius' access to this vault while he was alive, but these instructions expired upon his death, though it would take Sirius nearly a year (and Remus' assistance) to discover that he could enter all of the Black vaults without difficulty after he broke out from Azkaban. Sirius would never work a real job either, save for his two years at the Auror Academy, but he went more often to the vault his father left for him, perhaps sensing that the gold was less tainted, and less weighty, and the only way Orion Black could provide for his son without shame or anger).

So Sirius banished his doubts from his mind and focused on his godson for as long as he could, ignoring the ghost of Albus that lingered in his mind and told him sadly that he must succumb to fear, if only to help James' son stay alive. He focused on Harry so intently that he missed everything else, and therefore it came as a surprise to him on the first morning of the third week when Harry sat him down in the kitchen and asked him if he'd ever heard of Horcruxes.

"Horcruxes?" Sirius asked, blinking in surprise.

Harry nodded solemnly. Ron and Hermione sat to his left like guards, their faces distant and remote. "A Horcrux is an incredibly Dark artefact of some kind. It—they—it makes you immortal. They make *Him* immortal."

“There are books on it, in the Black library,” Hermione added, pointedly.

“And how do you know about these Horcruxes?” Sirius asked, more to buy himself time than anything else. Albus had not told him that anyone else had known, and Sirius never would have thought Albus would tell sixteen year old Harry Potter. He felt a traitorous flicker of anger that Albus had put Harry in danger, that he had not trusted Sirius fully.

Harry exchanged a quick look with Ron. "Dumbledore told me."

"I see." Sirius leaned back and evaluated his godson, his mind unusually clear. Albus had told both Sirius and Harry, yet neither had been told to seek out the other. Why? Had Albus told each only part of the story, to make each task less onerous? Perhaps Harry was lying; perhaps he had eavesdropped on a conversation or Hermione had seen a page of Sirius' notes, left upstairs in the library. There was no reason for Harry to be brought into the task. It was Sirius' task, and only Sirius'. He was the adult wizard; he was the protector; he was the Black heir; he was—

"We went to find one, the night Dumbledore died," Harry continued softly, and Sirius ran his tongue uncomfortably against the ridges of his teeth. Albus hadn't brought Sirius. Why hadn't he brought Sirius? Perhaps because Albus had discerned that Sirius would be already familiar with the stain of Dark magic, that it already lived in his blood and called to him…perhaps he had not trusted Sirius, as he trusted James' son…

"There were these awful caves, full of magic, and a big lake with Inferi." Haltingly, Harry explained: the boat, the journey to the centre, the large stone basin with a locket inside. His words began to come more slowly, more metered, like the irregular ticking of a clock whose time charm was petering out. "Dumbledore…drank the potion. Draught of Despair, he said. He saw awful things…he was crying…"

Despite his unease at the story, Sirius reached out to grip Harry's knee. His brow furrowed. Draught of Despair…he was not already familiar with it, but he could guess what kind of awful protection Voldemort would have levied against intruders. Albus had brought *Harry* as his only protection?

Left behind, whispered the house, and the silverware rattled softly next to Sirius' plate, and the remnants of a scroll fluttered agitatedly inside Kreacher's dwelling, Sirius' brother's handwriting faded against the soft parchment. ***Unwanted. Safe.***

He withdrew his hand from Harry's knee, covered his silverware with his napkin, and set his hand in his lap without fully realising that he had moved. Hermione noticed, though, and so did Ron, and they exchanged puzzled looks.

"I touched the water, and the Inferi attacked." Here Harry looked up, and Sirius' mind went blank as it cut itself on the jagged look in his godson's eyes. "Dumbledore had to protect me…he exhausted himself, Sirius. It was my fault."

"No, Harry," Sirius said immediately over Ron and Hermione's protests. "Never think that."

Harry looked as though he was going to protest, but Hermione replaced Sirius' hand on Harry's knee, and Harry subsided angrily. Sirius was familiar with that mutinous look, and he knew that Harry would not be any easier than Lily to placate.

(And, a voice whispered in his head traitorously, perhaps Harry was right. Who knew what the Draught of Despair would have done to Albus? Who knew what magic he had summoned to fight off a lake of Inferi? Perhaps his magic had been exhausted, and Snape had caught him weakened…perhaps if he had been alone, or with an adult wizard…

Sometimes people die, and their deaths are someone else's fault. James and Lily had died because of Sirius. If any of these three children died, it would be his fault too. He had promised to himself not to lie to Harry, but should he lie to him now, for comfort, or meet Harry with the truth and help him face it?)

“The worst part is,” Harry continued softly, his hand reaching into the pockets of his robes, “is that the locket wasn’t even real.”

And then Sirius was no longer listening, because the handwriting on the note that Harry produced was searingly familiar to him, and the initials at the bottom of the note matched the ones on the sign upstairs, and he felt abruptly like he would throw up. The house moaned around him, mourning the loss of its most-loved heir, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione drew closer to each other anxiously as the books fluttered on the shelves. They thought it was his magic lashing out, and certainly his magic felt wild and uncontrolled, but the grief was not only his—

"Regulus," Sirius coughed out, and with a flash he could see how it all happened. Sirius had always understood his brother, or at the very least he would have said he understood his brother, once: straight laced and honourable, driven by duty, easily led by those stronger than him, impetuous when pushed. Sirius had not expected Regulus to follow him to Gryffindor, nor to disownment—but he had been surprised, in a small private place in his heart, to hear in a gleefully smug letter from his mother that his brother had taken the Mark.

His brother had been easily led, but he'd never been cruel. The irony had not escaped Sirius: that Sirius, despite it all, was the son better suited to be named heir, that he was capable of the Black family cruelty that was his only birthright. Sirius had always privately thought that his father approved of him more, was always more lenient to Sirius' rebellions, because they came from a place of strength, and Orion Black respected only strength, and Walburga only loyalty. Regulus had always been too soft, too quiet, more prone to sketching and studying than strategy. It did not surprise Sirius to learn that his brother had tired of the Dark Lord.

But that Regulus had *turned?* That he'd learned of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes, and stolen one, and possibly managed to destroy it? He must have been killed for the sin of it; Regulus wasn't the type of wizard to be able to escape notice.

Sirius thought of his brother, drinking the Draught of Despair as Harry had described it, fighting off Inferi in his weakened state…

Perhaps he hadn't been killed by the Dark Lord. Perhaps he had slipped into the waters and been laid to rest with the other damned souls…perhaps the real locket was still there, glinting

under the water, choking his baby brother to death…

"Sirius?" Harry asked cautiously. "Who is Regulus?"

Sirius opened his mouth without any conception of what to say. By all rights, Regulus was no longer his brother. Sirius' blood no longer ran through his veins, and the years where they shared every memory had long dissipated into the wind. Yet the loss of Regulus struck Sirius now, in a way he hadn't allowed himself to dwell on before. He'd lost the only person in the world who knew how to decipher between his father's many gaits as he walked down the staircase, who could see the danger in the extra beat of hesitation before Orion turned toward one of their bedrooms. He'd lost the only person who knew that his mother was drunk nearly every afternoon of their childhood, that she'd taken the potion that most pureblood mothers use after two children to ensure there wasn't another challenger to the throne. (Druella had suffered three children precisely because they were all girls). He'd lost the only person who knew all of the smells of Grimmauld, and all of its creaking mysteries, and the sense of dread that would settle over its small child heirs in the middle of the night, when they woke to see shadows moving across the ceiling, and they felt a sense of strangled horror.

"Albus told me of the Horcruxes," Sirius said, instead of saying anything else. "He tasked me with their destruction."

Harry smiled, quick and sudden, and the smile was, strangely, all Remus, blinking his eyes blearily open after a night at the Shrieking Shack. "He asked you to help me."

"I—" Sirius thought back to that last meeting with Albus, but he could not remember precisely what Albus had said. His mind felt curiously empty. "I didn't think he would have told you, Harry."

"He'd been hunting them all year," Harry explained breathlessly. "I think—I think he suspected he may soon…die." At this last, Harry gave the barest flinch, mirrored by Sirius' own. Harry looked up to Sirius bravely. "I think he only told me…told *us*…when he had no choice. I *knew* he wouldn't have left us alone. He would have told us both this summer, Sirius, I know it. If *Snape* hadn't…"

Part of Sirius noted with apprehension the hatred laced through Harry's tone and the anger that curled his lip. But a greater part of him felt the same mingling of emotions, that Albus had not left *Sirius* alone, either, but that Snivellus had come between them once again.

"Who is Regulus, Sirius?" Ron asked, his voice steady. He exchanged a look with Hermione and then said, tentatively, "Is he…was he…your brother?"

"We saw the sign," Hermione clarified quickly, her voice like the flutter of a nervous bird. "Upstairs. I thought…we thought it may be *RAB*."

"You did?" Harry was distracted by his anger, turning to glance suspiciously at his friends. "You didn't tell me?"

"Harry, mate, you've not exactly been easy to talk to," Ron said defensively. "And we knew you were going to talk to Sirius soon. We thought we'd bring it up then. Now."

Without speaking, or hearing Harry's retort, or Ron's snapped reply, Sirius stood and found himself walking heavily up three flights of stairs. The carpet coiled and released under his feet, as if unsure whether to let him pass, and the ornate brass doorknob on Regulus' door burned fiercely and protectively.

He was my brother, Sirius said helplessly to the door, as he could not say to Harry. Kreacher watched from his hidden perch in the stairwell and after a moment's hesitation he snapped his fingers quietly and the doorknob cooled, unsure of what to make of the Black heir in this state.

Inside, the room was precisely how Sirius would have imagined it. Regulus' photos were on his desk, and his chair was pulled out jauntily, as if he'd just been sitting on it. His bedspread was taut and even, and the books on the bed stand were neatly lined up, and the painting that Regulus had done after his third year of Hogwarts remained stubbornly intact, though Sirius knew their mother had hated to see it so uncouthly adorn the wall.

In the upper right-hand corner, a spiderweb stretched across the two walls, and a rat peered through a small hole in the ceiling to examine the room's occupants. A small Muggleborn boy in Number Ten Grimmauld Place looked up curiously, scratching at the back of his neck, though he was too young to recognise the feeling of wards sparking in the moist summer air. In a small alley off the main road, Mundungus Fletcher groaned fitfully at a sudden pain in his neck, loudly enough that Dolores Umbridge paused during her furtive mission to obtain illegally brewed Veritaserum and looked around her, eyes narrowed, spotting a glimmer of gold beneath dirty robes.

Inside the room, Harry and Ron and Hermione crowded behind Sirius as he took one shaking step after another, his eyes fixated on the newspaper clippings posted on the opposite wall, his eyes flicking furiously between them, struggling to read the answer to a puzzle he had not known existed. Sirius had not entered his brother's room, and he was suddenly glad of his cowardice, for the posted notes charting Voldemort's life told a very different story now than it would have before, and he was relieved to read it now with changed eyes.

"Was he a spy?" Hermione asked, her voice soft behind him.

Sirius imagined it, for one glorious second: his brother, a spy, perhaps ferrying information, or freeing prisoners, or using his considerable wealth and meagre influence to turn the tide of the Death Eaters. Dying in service, in ignominy. Albus lying to Sirius all these years.

"No," Sirius said heavily, and he was both saddened and relieved by the thought. "Regulus would have taken the Mark willingly. Our parents…there would have been no other option for him, and at seventeen, I'd reckon he was excited to take the Mark, the little prick."

"So he turned," said Harry, and his voice was curiously expressionless. "Why?"

Sirius could hear the question that Harry asked as clearly as if he'd shouted it. Could they trust that Regulus *had* turned? Was it a lie perpetuated by Voldemort? Had Regulus tried, and been too weak to succeed? What could have motivated the young Black heir so strongly to have him risk life for his secret rebellion?

“I don’t know,” Sirius said honestly, helplessly. "I didn't—I didn't speak to him, after I was disowned."

Hermione opened her mouth, and Ron trod on it. His eyes were warm and understanding, though Sirius had not looked up to notice. Ron had not taken the desertion of his older brother as easily as his friends would have said he had, and years of witnessing the various power struggles of the Burrow had given him more insight into these types of complex relationships than he would admit to having. This past year, Hermione had spat angrily at Ron that he had the emotional range of a teaspoon, and perhaps he did, but his mind was working in its steady, persistent way, and there was just something a bit *off* about his brother the prat suddenly masquerading as a Death Eater, and something a bit odd about Bill returning to England with his French fiancée, and something a bit strange about his father's rapidly declining health. He had no trouble understanding why Sirius may not have spoken to Regulus, or why Sirius was standing there now, looking a bit lost.

"We'll find out," said Ron stoutly. "If your brother took the locket. We'll track it down, Sirius."

That night, Sirius lay for hours, staring at his ceiling, in a reversal of the many months he had spent in slumber. Harry had asked the right question, though perhaps for the wrong reason. Sirius did not doubt that his brother had successfully found the Horcrux, though perhaps he had not successfully destroyed it. (A flash of light, his uncle's laughter, a strange slithering beneath the floorboards, a seizing in Sirius' chest. A catch—and a release.) Regulus for all his flaws had been a perfectly competent wizard, as all the Black children were expected to be. He had not had Sirius' flashes of insight, nor Bella's raw power, nor Andy's wide-ranging knowledge, nor Cissy's exquisite control, but he had excelled in the quiet, understated way that he had approached all things in life. Seeker, Prefect, plenty of Outstandings.

And Regulus would have known what a Horcrux was. He could have heard the word somewhere in the Dark Lord’s presence and recognised it. He would have felt the Dark stench of Voldemort's magic, as Sirius had felt that awful day when he dropped to his knees over James' prone body, and he would have understood what tainted it so, and he would have researched Voldemort with the same steady competence that Sirius had resented for so long.

(***You've heard this word before***, said Albus, and the house hissed, drawing into itself. Sirius watched as a web on his ceiling stretched too thin and snapped, sending small rivulets of silver spiralling down to the floor.)

But *why?*

Sirius had begged for Regulus to follow him. He'd taken his broom and his trunk and he'd perched on Regulus' window and extended a hand. He'd withdrawn enough money for the both of them, and he'd found a small flat for them to share in Diagon Alley, and he'd even researched how to free Kreacher, knowing Regulus was too soft-hearted to leave the bloody elf to his fate. He'd said things to Regulus that he never would have dared say otherwise. He'd said *please,* a word his father had instructed him never to let pass his lips, and he'd held out his hand, and Regulus had said no.

*"**One of us needs to be here**,"* Regulus had said, and the way that he'd perched upright in bed had reminded Sirius of a small, bristling bird. "***They won't allow us both to go.***"

*"**I'll fight them**,"* Sirius had promised, recklessly and truthfully, and Regulus had smiled at him, and Sirius had felt the back of his neck prickle.

"***The Black family needs an heir***," Regulus had said, simply, and that knowledge had landed between them and clanged uncomfortably in the silence of the night.

Sirius had known—

Sirius had *known—*

Sirius had known what Regulus had meant, but he had pretended not to, particularly when retelling this story to his friends. "***An heir***," he'd scoffed to James. "***The Black family would be better off if there were never any heirs again***."

Had it been selfishness, as Sirius had convinced himself, or bravery? If Sirius had not been enough to cause Regulus to turn, what could have so motivated him later?

Regulus had no friends, no girlfriend, no acquaintances that were not Death Eaters, the lot of them. He had known what Voldemort was, and he had extended his arm willingly. What would have caused him to *turn?*

"Why?" Sirius whispered, and the house pressed on on him from all sides, a heavy darkness that claimed his eyelids and slid them toward sleep.

An emerald pool, and glinting walls, and a great large cavern with an eerie sort of chanting, and white limbs slipping through the water, and eyes that glimmered in the darkness.

He felt fear and in his fear he felt young. His jaw clenched, and his back trembled, and his hand felt sweaty against his wand. He was not brave and never had been, but he had been desperate all of his life, and it felt familiar to him, though he had the sensation he had left the living world behind and descended into death.

He looked at his companion, who stared back at him with wide, frightened eyes—

—And suddenly, Sirius was awake and in the kitchen, and Harry was asking him a question.

"Sorry?" Sirius rubbed at his eyes. He hadn't slept very well; he'd had a strange dream, though the details were fading from his mind, and throughout his morning routine he'd had the odd sensation that he was sleepwalking.

"Where would Regulus have kept the locket, if he couldn't destroy it?"

"Right," Sirius said distractedly. He could not help but notice that they four had all decided the locket was not destroyed. Hermione and Ron out of some sort of pragmatism, if Sirius had to guess, and Harry out of pessimism, and Sirius out of the unhappy knowledge of how difficult destroying a Horcrux must be. "Here, potentially, or the Black family vault. He didn't —to my knowledge, he didn't have a vault aside from the main one."

(His father, standing impossibly tall in front of him, one of the few times that Sirius had been invited to his private study, which connected directly to his bedroom. It had given Sirius an odd feeling in his stomach to walk by the large bed, the sheets pulled so tightly against the bed that he imagined the frame gasping for air. Any visitors would, of course, Floo into the room directly, and Orion would order one of their house elves to take them to the grand dining room if necessary. Sirius would have rather used the Floo.

A large obsidian key, cool to the touch. "***It is your own***," Orion said, and Sirius had thrilled to hear it. Despite his opulent and rather spoiled background, he'd never had something that was truly his. Toys were shared with his cousins and brother, and his school things were hardly possessions, given how readily Sirius lost and replaced them. "***Nobody, even I, can take this from you."***

"***Not even Regulus****?"*

His father's nostrils flared before he could control the movement. Instead of ducking his head in shame, Sirius straightened his back and stared back. Orion smiled thinly.

"It is our secret.")

"Can we check the vault?"

Sirius pursed his lips and considered it. "I have an itemised list of my assets," he said thoughtfully. He didn't notice Harry exchanging a startled look with his friends as Sirius' voice unconsciously began to take on a more formal cadence. "It's not updated, but presumably Regulus would have deposited the locket before his death, if he were able."

Yet when Sirius reviewed his account statements, lingering over the section on *physical assets*, he didn't see anything in any of his vaults that could feasibly be Slytherin's locket. All of the Black family jewellery was painstakingly photographed and catalogued. The Black family was a jealous lot, after all, and they knew that their power was stored in their treasures as much as in their magic and their name. There were crowns and lockets aplenty, delicate golden spoons and plates and the slimmest of shimmering goblets, but nothing that could not be accounted for during the many years that Orion Black had held the vault in charge for his sons. Bella's vault was now owned by Narcissa, but Sirius couldn't imagine that Regulus would have gone to *Bella* to conceal a Horcrux. She would have recognised it too.

The house, whispered something in Sirius' ears, and he tensed, wondering suddenly if he'd imagined the way the floorboards had creaked softly beneath him, as if bending under an invisible weight. He looked up suspiciously at the flutter of the curtains, straining for a hint of a ghost or a spirit.

Yet his father's study looked the same as it always had, in Sirius' memory. Still, he realised uncomfortably that the leather seat was cold under him, though he'd been sitting for quite some time, and the shadows that collected in the corners of the room seemed deeper than they ought, and many of the rooms in the Black house concealed hidden spaces. He'd never learned all of the secrets of the accursed place, but Regulus…Regulus would have been told, wouldn't he? He'd been a proper heir, not like Sirius, who had fled his destiny before it had settled around his shoulders.

Sirius noted absently that his palms were damp, and his wand felt slippery. It was difficult for him to imagine his brother as the Black heir, but of course he would have been the last to sit in this chair, the last to command the power of the house. Sirius could feel the house in the back of his mind, scraped against his bony shoulders, but he felt it as one would feel a cold draft, or the sprinkle of rain before a downpour. He had not delved—

He had not dared—

Standing, suddenly, Sirius wiped his hands on his robes and flicked his wand at the candles hanging from their iron wreaths. The blaze of light was comforting, and he turned his face unconsciously toward the door, which creaked quietly open. His lips compressed, Sirius looked around him with an evaluate glimmer in his eyes, some of his old cunning stirring itself wearily awake. If he were Regulus…

The great old desk was an obvious choice, and a dangerous one, and for that reason Sirius allowed his eyes to pass over the darkened wood. Regulus did not like small, secret things; Sirius did not linger on why this knowledge popped back into his mind, twenty years later. Regulus would not have dared to open the compartments of his father's desk.

An old flame surged in Sirius' mind, and he flicked his wand savagely at the main drawer, which flew open obediently and displayed its contents: blank sheaths of parchment and his father's favourite quill. Sirius released the breath he hadn't remembered taking and moved on.

He directed the light from his wand into the dark corners, which revealed themselves to be benign and bare, though dusted with small grey spiders and their glimmering webs. He disturbed the line of books on the shelf, but he did not sense a boundary of a ward hiding a hidden space. The mantle was bare, as were the floorboards under the rug, and in Sirius' state of hyperfocus, he did not fall prey to the dark, rhythmic thumping that concealed the soft buzz of protective wards that would not have obeyed his wand, had he been fool enough to try dismantling them.

There was absolutely nothing in the room of note—and yet still Sirius felt the back of his neck prickle, and the ghost of his brother's cry.

No, Regulus would not have concealed the locket, not here in the nexus of their father's power. It would be somewhere *else*, though Harry and his friends had spent the day searching Regulus' room to no avail.

Sirius pressed his thumbs into the deep wells next to his eyes. Regulus was clever; he liked those little puzzle boxes and the riddles printed in the Friday edition of the *Daily Prophet.* Yet Regulus also never opened his eyes fully to the shadowy secrets of Grimmauld Place. The locket, if it were not destroyed, would be in the house, but not too deep. Somewhere where Regulus could enter without closing his eyes for courage.

I'm not as brave as you, said Regulus, his voice echoing in Sirius' ears.

You don't have to be. I'll be brave enough for both of us.

Sirius slammed the door of his father's study shut and stomped savagely through the eerily quiet bedroom, pressing his feet savagely into the worn steps of the staircase as he descended to his floor. He heard Harry stirring in the guest room opposite his own, and he quieted his steps as he moved anxiously around his old furniture. His Hogwarts trunk and stacks of books, even his old pinup posters. He'd thought they were funny to have still hanging, as if his parents had been too afraid to take them down, as if despite his twelve years in prison he was the same youthful bastard he'd been so proud to be, once upon a time. Even James had redecorated his room after graduation, replacing his photographs of Aurors with cheesy sentimental shots of the Marauders and Lily, but Sirius had not returned to this room until each of those photographs seared across his eyes. Regulus should have trashed his whole room. Sirius would have trashed *his,* if the situation had been reversed.

(The house rustled, amused. Of course Sirius had not disturbed Regulus' room, even when he'd believed his brother to be a loyal follower of the Dark Lord. It was not that easy to wreak havoc on areas once thought to be precious).

Harry, the next morning, seemed unwilling to accept Sirius' claim that Regulus had kept the locket in the house. "Why not Gringotts?" He demanded yet again, and Sirius twitched to himself uneasily. His persistence was more Lily than James, and Sirius had never quite learned to deal with it from her either.

"I checked the accounts," Sirius said, striving for finality. "It's not there, Harry."

"So if it's in the house, we need to *find* it." Harry looked pleadingly at Ron and Hermione, who nodded supportively, but cautiously, Sirius could not help but notice. Sirius scowled, more at the ghost of similar such looks from his friends more than once, and then felt abruptly guilty at the resulting expression on Harry's face.

"The house is dangerous," Sirius said, his tone even. He knew even as he said it what Harry's response would be: outraged incredulity spelling itself across the tired page of his face. What made it worse was the tinge of betrayal that Sirius could spot behind the glint of Harry's glasses.

"Dangerous," said Harry, flatly. "Right."

"You can't just—go poking about," Sirius tried, aware of how inadequate the words were. "Harry, there's years of Black…curses inside these walls."

"We've been living here for weeks without a spot of trouble," Harry hissed back, and Sirius smiled without realising it, teeth exposed from bloodless lips.

"Because you are under my protection."

"So *protect us* while we find the locket! Don't you understand, Sirius? We've got to! We've got to find it and destroy it! I have to destroy *Him!"*

"*We* have to," Sirius said fiercely. "*We* have to, Harry. You aren't alone in this task."

Ron shifted uncomfortably, and Hermione widened her eyes meaningfully at Harry. Harry ignored them. He did not blame Sirius for wanting to protect him, but he did not intend to excuse Sirius, either. Dumbledore had trusted Harry, had trusted him as an adult, had given him what he had and appointed Harry the executor of his mission. Sirius *had* to see that to exclude Harry would be to damn him. "Then *help me*, Sirius. There's nothing in this house that's more dangerous than *Him*, than what's out there."

"We cleaned some of the house in the summer," Ron interjected quietly. "With Mum. Maybe we could start in those rooms?"

Molly Weasley had taken one look at the dust and grime and strange, lurking darkness of Grimmauld Place and approached it with her usual competent pragmatism. Molly had been raised in the ancestral Prewett home, and she'd walked away from it at nineteen years old with a tiny gemstone on her finger and a man with a large heart by her side. The Prewett house had never been cruel to her, and neither had the Prewetts, though her opinion had changed later, after years allowed the onset of delayed anger to tinge her early memories. The Prewetts were not the type of family that flirted with power outside their means. They were powerful, but they were cautious, and they prided themselves more on their strict adherence to the rules than to anything else. Twelve of the ancestors on the Prewett family tapestry had been judges of the Wizengamot in their time, and two had been well-regarded Potioneers.

Molly had not been harmed in her childhood, but she had been stifled. Her house was silent after nine in the evening, a dreadful, lingering sort of silence, the type that made Molly from six to eight too afraid to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. She had not feared a beast under her bed, as Narcissa had around the same age, nor the wrath of her father, as had Regulus, but rather feared disturbing the sacred stillness that her parents insisted on once the family clock chimed for quiet hours. The rigidity had pressed into her from all sides. Paint slid off the walls and pooled at the floor when she tried to repaint her room a bright yellow, and she sometimes sat cross-legged on her bed and felt her chest squeezing, as if she too would be pressed into an obedient servitude and never released from her fate.

Molly had never encountered a house like Grimmauld, but she was not afraid of houses with a simmering sort of sentience, like the slow pop of a soup roasting on the stove. She was not afraid of many things, save for her children, all seven of them, dying in front of her eyes as she screamed helplessly behind a glass wall, unable to move. She rolled up her sleeves and she bought the very best cleaning potions with Sirius' money and she tied her hair out of her face, like she had as a girl, and she directed a battalion of Weasleys to attack the grimiest rooms. Molly remembered the first war and she knew it likely that she would be trapped in a safe house, perhaps *this* safe house, and she had no intention of allowing any of her family to rot away next to generations of poor Black souls.

Sirius had been annoyed at the time, but he'd been grateful, too. He hadn't had someone to disagree with in so long, nor someone who marched into his life and began to scrub hard at its dirt. He hadn't always appreciated Molly, but he'd liked her, and he'd recognised that they shared the same purpose, that they both felt the gnawing guilt of growing to love a child that is not yours, to care for him in the stead of those who deserved to be alive. Sirius looked at Ron, his nose smeared with dirt and his smattering of freckles, and felt abruptly sorry for

Molly, who was at this very moment likely eradicating every smudge of dirt from the Burrow for lack of anything else to do.

He is an adult, Sirius told himself firmly. Hadn't he argued the very same to Molly, more than once? Hadn't Harry faced off with Voldemort and won? Hadn't James been so impossibly old at seventeen, in some ways, so sure about Lily, so ready for his next steps? *The house cannot hurt him. You are conjuring ghosts when there are real enemies afoot.*

Sirius held their gazes carefully. He will not lie to them, as adults had always lied to him. "There are Dark Artefacts in here that will curse you, pureblood or not," he said precisely. "There are books that will send you into an enchanted sleep, never to awaken, and trust me, it won't be pleasant. There are warded shelves that will burn your fingers if you try to take items off of them. There are doorways that you will only be able to enter, not leave."

"So you won't let us look, then."

Sirius hesitated. Lily's eyes on James' face. "I won't let you look *alone.* Promise me that you won't go into a room unless I've determined it to be safe. I'm not joking, Harry."

"The house," Hermione interjected softly. "It's sentient?"

They all looked up together, as if expecting the great old chandelier to sway, or the gleaming goblets on the sideboard to come crashing to the ground. But the house was silent and still.

"It is formally sworn to the Black family," Sirius said instead of answering. "And many of my ancestors spent their time fortifying it with their magic. Even I am not immune to its defences."

Though the windows were grimy and the light dim and unsettled, a soft glow began to flood the inside of the room as the sky turned itself gleefully over from dawn to day. The light gleamed softly in the row of burnished pots and pans hanging over the great wood stove, and the dust that lingered hopefully near the curtains looked for one fleeting moment like jewels, ephemeral yet beautiful. Sirius suddenly was sure that the house hated him.

He sighed and sagged into himself, and for one precious moment he allowed himself to imagine it was James in front of him, rather than his son. "I am not warning you because I do not believe you are capable," he said finally. "This house—it poses a danger to you, to all of us. I grew up here, but there were some things that even I dared not disturb. If we are to look seriously for the locket, we must do so in pairs. Harry and Ron together—Harry is my godson, and Ron is my distant cousin. Hermione, I need you to promise not to go poking around without me."

Hermione's first reaction was outraged incredulity, but she forced herself to move beyond and consider Sirius' point logically. She had been trying not to admit there was any difference between her and the others, as had been her persistent, defiant custom since she was eleven. Yet she had to admit that the house gave her an odd, uneasy feeling, like a damp fog that lingered against her skin, or the faintest smell of rubbish from an outside bin. "Yes," she said, her voice high and faint. "Yes. I promise."

Do not harm them, Sirius ordered the house, and he did not notice the gleam in the corner, from where Kreacher was watching, nervous and displeased, pressed into the wall and unable to move.

Restraints

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4: Restraints

In truth, Hermione was not altogether displeased to be assigned to Sirius. With their usual pragmatism, she and Ron had mutually decided to set aside the strange, brittle tension from the end of term in favour of their usual set of tasks: watching Harry carefully, and shouldering him through the throngs at the funeral, and bludgeoning the truth into his head that they were not going to leave him, and weaselling out the full story of the horrid prophecy and the Horcruxes. Still—and Hermione was disgusted in herself for her weakness—some of that tension remained, lingering around Ron's lips and Hermione's brow, their shared complicity in the awful news that the night Harry had been whisked away and their castle breached, there had been a second of peace between them, a long walk around the lake, an unexpected détente.

Hermione didn't know whether Ron felt as guilty as she for those strange, stolen moments of happiness. Certainly he ought to feel *more* guilty than she, considering he'd spent most of the year attached to Lavender Brown while Hermione listened patiently while Harry was introduced to the unsteady depths of his worst enemy. (Hermione was not envious of Harry for these private sessions with Dumbledore, but she did wish she could have seen the memories herself, rather than relying on Harry's secondhand testimony, and been given the opportunity to ask Dumbledore questions directly). And yet that walk around the lake had clarified some things for them both, even as it had introduced a new gamut of questions.

Sirius, for all the dark, anguished looks he sent to Harry when he thought nobody was noticing, was a far simpler partner than either Ron or Harry. Hermione had never been particularly close to Sirius, but she felt she understood him, enough. He wanted to protect Harry, but he wanted to be friends with him, too. Hermione quite understood the sentiment.

As such, Sirius and Hermione moved efficiently through the upper rooms—Hermione picking her way through Sirius' mother's things with a mixture of guilt and morbid curiosity, while he grimly tackled his father's crisply organized belongings—without speaking, save for Sirius' muttered comments and half-hearted explanations.

"My mum wore that to every gala," he'd say, nodding at a glistening diamond necklace. "It was warded to emit a soft privacy charm at all times."

Or, absently, "My father had a house elf whose job it was to dress him, every day. This is the stool he used to stand on to reach my father's head."

Or, meditatively, "The door used to be cursed so neither Regulus or I could open it. I wonder when that curse expired, after his death, or hers?"

At this last, Hermione—who for all her bravado and her parents' absent caregiving, had spent most of her fifth year of life sleeping fretfully between her parents, afraid of the patterns her magic made on the walls—had to respond.

"You mean—you mean you'd be cursed if you tried to get into your parents' room? What if… what if you needed them?"

"For what?" Sirius asked with an air of genuine curiosity. "We had Kreacher if we needed anything."

Hermione thought of the grumpy elf with his low, bullfrog murmur and shivered to herself. She'd told Ron only yesterday that she'd noticed Sirius had been a bit—weird, but she supposed now she could understand why.

Ron had noticed, too, though he'd noticed in a different way than Hermione. Hermione had noticed the way that Sirius' eyes tracked Harry hungrily, and the way he clenched and uncurled his fingers in his lap, and the way he sometimes jerked or shook his head, as if listening to inaudible music. Remnants from his time in Azkaban, she'd concluded, and she'd begun reading some of the books in the library that might suggest a course of treatment.

Ron noticed Sirius' magic, the silky, cloying feel of it, like fine dress robes buttoned too tightly at the neck. He noticed it both because Ron, for all his apparent blindness, had always had a keen sense of magic, and because his neck prickled uneasily whenever Sirius seemed to be scowling without a clear recipient of his anger. Something was wrong, but he wasn't quite sure what, and though he trusted Sirius enough to leave Hermione at his side, he was glad to have Harry safely ensconced downstairs.

Harry was acting a bit weird too, but at least Ron felt he knew why. His friend Harry was prophesied to kill You Know Who. There were *bits of his soul* scattered throughout the world, and Harry had been tasked by Dumbledore to destroy them all. Harry was grieving Dumbledore and afraid of the prophecy and chafing, despite himself, under the restrictive pressure set upon him unexpectedly by Sirius, who had once told Harry to start an illegal group underneath Umbridge's nose, the Ministry be damned. Ron understood Harry. He'd always been able to understand Harry, even right from the start.

Ron had never envied Harry for his role as the Boy Who Lived, nor his connection to Voldemort. He'd had plenty of other things to envy: Harry's sometimes miraculous grasp of defensive magic, despite his middling exam grades, and his full, lavish vault, and his innate Quidditch ability, and his inexplicable magnetism to the groups of girls who giggled whenever Harry looked their way. Ron was mature enough now to admit those things had always bothered him.

But Ron had never once wished he were Harry. He had never once wished for a scar on his forehead nor for a destiny so heavy that Ron could scarcely imagine how Harry lifted his head under it. Whenever Ron began to feel that old, unpleasant jealousy, he forced himself to remember the sight of his best mate in the world facing off against a dragon without anything other than his broomstick and his wits. There had been worse moments, since then—Harry, pale and shaking after the graveyard, and Harry screaming as You Know Who tortured him, and Harry trembling uncontrollably, tripping over the words, *he's dead, Dumbledore's dead*—

but Ron would remember vividly for the rest of his life what it felt like to realise suddenly that Harry may have been about to die, without Ron by his side, just because Ron had been a little insecure prat. That feeling anchored him, even as he dreamed of it, Harry dying alone in a old, creaking forest or a cave set upon the wild, roaring waves of an interminable ocean, as Ron screamed without sound, unable to reach him, his voice stolen by the winds, his limbs frozen by his own unforgivable decisions. Ron, Percy, and Molly all shared the same nightmares, a family heritage of their own, though they would never have cause to discuss it.

“Why do you think Dumbledore didn’t tell you he told Sirius?” Ron asked, hesitantly. The last time Hermione had asked this question, Harry had snapped at her viciously.

Harry shrugged, crouching to examine a locked cabinet in the downstairs hallway. He jiggled the lock optimistically before stepping back and pointing his wand. *“Alohomora.* ”

What Ron really wanted to ask was whether Harry thought Dumbledore ever would have told him the truth. Dumbledore had told Harry all sorts of strange and awful secrets, locked up there in his tower. Ron couldn’t imagine it would have been too great of a secret for Dumbledore to tell Harry about Sirius, not with all the other secrets he’d revealed. Something clanged uncomfortably in Ron's head, though he couldn't say what, precisely, bothered him about Dumbledore's final actions. Yet Ron was trying to not worry about deciphering the signals he had noticed. Both Ron and Percy (and Fred and George too) understood the value of letting ideas or insights simmer just out of reach, a fragile bubble that grew only when unobserved, vulnerable to the sharp sting of direct attention. He would get there, eventually, as long as he averted his gaze and pretended he was indifferent to the outcome.

“He would have,” Harry said fiercely, and Ron resisted the urge to raise his eyebrows incredulously at the bite in Harry’s tone. “If that bastard Snape hadn’t been there.”

Ron shuddered at the reminder. He was not as angry as he would have thought he would be, had he known what Snape would do, and he certainly was not as angry as Harry or Sirius. What Ron felt, though he wouldn’t have dared admitting it to anyone except for maybe Hermione, was *scared*. He’d always hated Snape, but he’d mouthed off to him, and scowled at him during detention, and called him a greasy bat, and generally insulted everything about him, particularly during exams. But he hadn’t thought Snape would be a *murderer*. He hadn’t thought he would murder *Dumbledore*. He’d been on their side. He’d *been on their side.*

If Snape, who had always had Dumbledore’s trust, could turn on them—then who else might be a traitor? It had been one reason Ron had agreed with Harry’s plan to ask Sirius for help. They couldn’t trust anyone else. Even Percy was off being a little prick, which made all of Ron’s siblings suspect, and he hadn’t gotten to know anyone else in the Order very well.

“Well, we ought not to focus only on the locket,” Ron continued carefully. “I mean, I doubt it’s still in the house, Harry, and if it were, Sirius and Hermione’ll have the best chance of scouting it out.”

Harry scowled and jabbed his wand again at the locked cabinet. With a flash and a smoky bang, the drawer shot open and fell with a rattle on the floor, but when Ron and Harry crowded around it, they saw to their disappointment that it was only a collection of tarnished

silver spoons. Ron nudged one with his foot and then had the oddest feeling that his toe had turned to ice.

“What else did Dumbledore say, again?” Ron prodded, curling and uncurling his toes inside his socks. “The ring—that one’s destroyed. The locket was taken by Regulus. The Cup. Something of Ravenclaw or Slytherin…and what was the last one? The diary, right?”

Harry flinched.

Ron frowned. One of the spoons in the drawer turned itself over, nestling into another. Ron watched his and Harry's reflections warp and distort in the silver gleam and then dragged his eyes up to see Harry more clearly. “Where’s the diary, Harry?”

Harry seemed to draw himself up for a fight, and Ron found his own shoulders straightening and his fingers firming around his wand. He wasn’t above hexing Harry if it snapped him out of his churlish misery.

Yet after a second of bristling, Harry sighed and deflated, his hand going to the pocket of his robes. Ron had wondered why Harry would continue wearing his Hogwarts robes rather than the Muggle jeans he often favoured but hadn’t wanted to ask. “Dumbledore gave it to me,” said Harry quietly, and after a second, he withdrew the small black diary.

Ron swallowed. He’d last seen the book in the Chamber of Secrets, with his sister crumpled in his arms, and the high, eerie laughter of the ghost of Tom Riddle…

“Harry,” Ron said, slowly. ***Run***, said a teenaged Tom, laughter in his voice. ***Run and see if you can best me.***

Harry’s fingers tightened around the diary. “It’s *fine*,” he said, shoving it back into his robes. “Dumbledore gave it to me, Ron. He said the Horcrux was weakened so it would be safe to interact with it, sparingly. He thought Tom might be willing to give up the secrets of the Horcrux.”

“To his *worst enemy?”* Ron repeated incredulously.

“He might let something slip, Ron. You don’t understand. He’s—he’s *similar* to me. He doesn’t know who I am, not really.”

“He tried to kill you, Harry, and Ginny! And he possessed Percy, and now look what a git he’s become. You can’t *write* in it.”

“I’ll be fine, Ron, and I haven’t written in it. Not yet.” Harry turned away from him and began savagely jiggling at the next locked drawer in the cabinet. “And we’ve not got a choice. We need to find where the Cup is, and figure out what other thing he used.”

“You have to tell Sirius,” Ron said. Ron did not always *trust* Sirius, but Sirius cared for Harry more than he cared for anything else. Ron had seen that instantly. Sirius would not let Harry write in the *diary*. He wouldn’t let Harry get that close to Voldemort’s *soul*.

"I will," Harry promised. "But you can't say anything, Ron. Not to Sirius or to Hermione. I'll tell him, I just want to…tell him on my own time."

Ron, who knew perfectly well what Harry was capable of concealing when he felt hurt and cast away from the world, reluctantly agreed. He'd rather have Harry tell him his secrets rather than hide them, feeling scorned and alone.

But Harry didn't tell Sirius. He didn't tell Sirius about how Dumbledore had handed him the diary two weeks prior to his death, his face haggard and grey and his hand so terribly old and black, and said soberly, "I am sorry, my dear boy, for what more I must place on your shoulders."

He didn't tell Sirius what Dumbledore had said: that he had exhausted the life of Tom Riddle and not been able to discern any additional clues. The diary refused to speak to him, and Dumbledore had reached the cold end of the trail with Tom's memories. "We know the last is almost certainly a Founder's Artefact, and there are several candidates, but nothing certain," Dumbledore had said, and Harry had nodded, feeling his stomach clench at the even tone of Dumbledore's voice as he related his failure. Dumbledore didn't fail—he couldn't.

Harry had asked Dumbledore the same question as Ron, and Dumbledore had looked at him steadily over his ornate wooden desk until Harry's ears had flushed red with the attention. "He is like you, but you are not like him," said Dumbledore, finally. "And you must always remember that, or you will be lost."

Tom was sixteen years old, and he was prickly and suspicious. He knew who Harry was, and he did not trust him, and he certainly did not want to speak of his Horcruxes. Harry had only written in the diary once since Dumbledore's death, and it had gone poorly, and he'd slammed the book shut and shoved it under the bed, going sheepishly to retrieve it several hours later. It had taken him far longer than he'd want to admit to even find the blasted thing, which had seemingly gotten lost in the layers of grimy dust beneath the bed.

But he did not want to admit out loud, to himself or to Ron, that he didn't know how to charm or manipulate the diary into giving him the truth. Dumbledore thought he could do it, and so he would do it. He would not fail, not at this. This was the last task he'd been set, and he would see it through to the bitter end, even if it killed him.

***

July 1997 // five months remaining

Top to bottom and bottom to top. The house at 12 Grimmauld Place contained secrets, and shifting air in the hollow spaces behind the walls, and a plethora of tiny creatures below the floorboards, but in the end it was just a house, and by the time July rolled around, Sirius had

to admit that they'd searched the whole bloody thing, or at least the rooms that appeared to have doors that they could enter. The house had been curiously compliant; Sirius would have suspected a ploy, if he was stupid enough to admit out loud that he still felt—uneasy about the house. *It is just my magic*, he told himself, and ignored the dream he had been swept into the night prior, involving a horrific argument between Ted and Andy that had, at the time, ended in Andy storming out and claiming she would return to her family, Ted be damned. Sirius had woken sweating and heartsick, and his curtains had parted just enough to let a blinding moonbeam stare accusingly at him from outside. *It is just my guilt.* Sirius had had many such dreams, after all, in the thirteen years where Dementors floated over his head while he slept, and his private torments screamed at him with the voices of those he'd lost.

Hermione had greatly improved her detection spells under Sirius' tutelage, and Ron had taken the opportunity of "searching the house" to ensure Harry looked well, yet Sirius and Harry both, in their own, private ways, seethed over their failures.

Harry had always been a nighttime wanderer (an invisibility cloak at eleven, and an old mirror with impossible powers, and an unexpected map produced by his best friend's older brother), and he found that, predictably, he could not sleep very well in Grimmauld Place. The nightmares, maybe, as familiar as his worst enemy—Dumbledore, falling to the ground, and his mother floating out of Voldemort's wand, and the way his father's face twisted as he tormented Snape—or perhaps the general sense of unease that always prickled at the back of his neck. The house didn't like him; that was clear, and he would have voiced it sooner had he not still remembered his second year and the derision he'd faced for claiming to hear voices. Even with Ron and Hermione, there were occasionally moments of doubt, and Harry always found himself hesitating before speaking up about the malice that seemed to press into him on all sides during the night. (Lights that seemed to flicker when he walked by, and a soft scratching under his bed, and a cloudiness that crept over his window when the moon rose full and heavy.) It was a house, after all, and Harry had enough real enemies to worry about without adding imaginary ones to the mix too.

("Are there—haunted houses in the Wizarding World, Hermione?"

"Only in the literal sense, I suppose. You could have a ghost, or a poltergeist that follows you about. Why, do you feel like *this* house is haunted? Sirius said the wards wouldn't let a ghost in either, you know. Only non-magical creatures. No Animagi either, if you were wondering.")

At night, the house was no friendlier, but it seemed, oddly enough, more dormant, or at the very least, more familiar, more predictable. Harry walked quietly down the stairs, tiptoeing past Hermione and Ron's rooms, and turned onto the landing outside Regulus' room. This room seemed—different from the others, and he found part of his back relaxing as he stepped inside. It had become his habit to creep silently into Regulus' room and sit without moving, without even thinking, until the riotous turmoil in his mind stilled enough for him to claim some semblance of sleep from the early hours of the next day.

As was his custom, Harry crossed first to the desk, where his attention was caught anew by the photograph of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Regulus had been a Seeker, like Harry; and after a few nights of looking carefully at the photograph, Harry reckoned they even looked

similar, with their dark hair and small builds. Harry thought of the shade of Tom Riddle and shuddered. *I am not like him*, he reminded himself, and turned his attention back to Regulus, who smiled shyly up at him from behind his broom.

How had Sirius' *brother* learned of the Death Eaters, and why had he sought to destroy them? Something still pushed at Harry's mind. Sirius plainly had hated his younger brother; his face twisted angrily whenever he spoke of him, and he'd kept his room locked up for all this time. Harry could hardly imagine the likes of Draco Malfoy turning on his family and everything he held dear in an attempt to destroy the Dark Lord. Yet there was something in Regulus' face that suggested a softness, or a vulnerability. He reminded Harry, oddly, of Neville, though of course they must have had nothing in common. (Sirius and his father, laughing cruelly at a young Severus Snape. They had been wrong to bully him…but perhaps they had been right to laugh, given who Snape really was. Yet Harry had to wonder who *else* they may have judged too harshly.)

Regulus had died at eighteen years old. Only a year older than Harry was now. He shivered. His own birthday would be very soon. The blood wards—whatever his mother had done to protect him, all those years ago, were set to expire, and the idea made his chest feel tight and drawn. Dumbledore had made him promise to finish the summer at the Dursleys, but then again, Dumbledore had promised that he could trust Snape, and that had been a bloody lie. Harry had recently learned some things about Dumbledore, but he was trying not to think of them.

Sirius had said that Regulus would have taken the Mark at sixteen, a year after being formally designated the Black heir. He'd dropped to his knees in front of Voldemort and sworn eternal loyalty, and then two years later, he'd stolen one of his Horcruxes and been killed for it.

Harry felt his hand approaching his pocket. He wrenched it away quickly, using the movement to sit at the desk, as if that had been his intention. Dumbledore had asked him to write to Tom, to manipulate Tom in order to learn of the other Horcruxes, but Harry didn't have the slightest idea where to start.

"Exploit your similarities, " Dumbledore had told him. "***Think of what he would be feeling now.***"

But Harry had no bloody idea. Tom Riddle had been a murderer at sixteen. He'd torn his soul to bits. He'd been *Head Boy.* He'd hated Dumbledore, whereas Harry—

Harry scowled and turned away. Dumbledore had tried, but maybe Harry was too stupid to understand what Tom Riddle must be feeling. Dumbledore had said that he'd told Tom that he'd destroyed the ring, that he'd be scared.

Harry thought of Voldemort's scaly visage and shuddered. He didn't think *that* was particularly likely. Even if Tom *were* scared, how could that help Harry?

"What are you *doing?"*

Harry leapt to his feet, banging his knee painfully against the desk in the process, whirling to face Sirius.

"S-Sirius," stuttered Harry, unaccountably guilty. "I was—I was just thinking."

Sirius pushed his way into the room, his wand blazing in his hand. Harry scrambled for his, his heart beginning to thud erratically. "I told you not to come in here," Sirius snarled. "You promised me and you *disobeyed*."

Harry flinched instinctively at the edge in Sirius' tone at that last. "I'm sorry," he tried. "But it's just Regulus' room, Sirius. We already checked it—"

"*You are not allowed in here*."

Harry felt his back straightening, and he frowned up at Sirius, feeling curiously remote, as if he were in a dream. "Stop it, Sirius." Some instinct prompted him to add, "It's me. Harry."

For a frozen second, Sirius looked at Harry, and Harry felt a prickle of unease drip wetly down his spine. Then Sirius shook his head and smiled without humour. "I know," he said, but his voice still contained the memory of that strange, hostile snarl. "But you have to *listen* to me, Harry. I'm not trying to—to baby you, or not take you seriously. Merlin knows I'd be just as angry as you if someone tried to keep me locked up. But the house, it's—it's not safe."

Harry scoffed, but the sound seemed to echo strangely in the dark, stuffy room, and his derision quickly fell flat, so that he sounded younger than usual when he asked, “What do you mean, it’s not safe? We’re not touching any of the *things* we find in the drawers, you know that.”

Sirius sighed, flicking his eyes around the room. Harry looked tired in front of him, his eyes red and sleepless behind those damn wireframe glasses, and he looked uncomfortably familiar to Regulus, sitting as he was at Regulus’ desk. Sirius wiped roughly at his nose; all of Grimmauld Place was covered with a perpetual coating of dust, so that he always felt on the verge of a sneeze, and his eyes were always watering and itchy. Kreacher, the useless sod, seemed to spend all his time polishing his few prized possessions rather than cleaning anything of substance. Only Sirius’ mother and Regulus could order him around; though Orion Black had been his master, Kreacher had plainly hated him, and would only grudgingly follow his orders.

Thinking of Kreacher made something inside Sirius’ shoulders hurt, and he curled into himself, moving silently toward the bed. It produced a puff of dust as he clambered on it, and he wiped at his nose again. “It’s something about the house,” he said, and Harry’s head tilted toward him, his eyes following Sirius owlishly. “It sounds absurd, I know. I never believed it myself, when—well, when people whispered of it. But it’s not *normal,* Harry.”

“The entire house is cursed?” Harry asked, somewhat dubiously, but less dubiously as he would have two weeks prior. “But you all grew up here.”

Sirius smiled, with teeth. “Yes,” he said. “And so did my father, and his father too. It is not cursed, at least not with any sort of spell that my father was ever able to find, and he looked.

My uncles, they used to say it was…not sentient, not alive, but… *aware*, I think, is the word they would use." (*I am alive, I am aware, I am awake*, whispered Sirius to himself, and the house listened eagerly).

Harry seemed to shiver and draw into himself. Sirius pressed his palm into the scratchy comforter on Regulus' bed for purchase. "What does…what does it do?"

How to explain that the house did nothing at all, yet that doors seemed to swing shut when Sirius would prop them open, and the grates never produced fire unless carefully coaxed into obedience, and on rainy days the rain seemed to swell and gather in the corner of the ceilings, even on the first floor, like an endless wet web spun out of dirty dripping water? The house was perfectly quiet and perfectly obedient, yet Sirius could feel its hatred and its love of him so fiercely that he sometimes felt its emotions rather than his own. It was something he had begun to wonder: was he remembering Regulus with such fondness because the house liked Regulus, loved him for reasons Sirius did not want to remember? Was he beginning to forgive his father for his cold, imperious methods because the house respected his strength, even as he flexed his power needlessly against his two young boys?

"It seems to have magic of its own," Sirius said finally. "Rudimentary—feelings. It could be generations of my family's magic bringing it to life, like how your favourite mug remains warm or your quill sharpens itself when it feels your anticipation."

Harry nodded slowly. They had all experienced this, the stamp that their magic left on this world. Harry at one year old had been brimming with accidental magic, though his talents always seemed geared toward making things fly. Sirius had already seen the way that Hermione seemed to crackle with magic when she was set on a path of determination, and how the edges of the rugs straightened out when Ron walked carefully over them, and how Harry's magic swelled with his every mood so that his skin felt warm to the touch.

"And a lot of my family members were angry, cruel people." Sirius barked out a laugh, shaking his head. "My uncles were interested in Dark magic, very Dark magic…they were the ones who taught me what a Horcrux was. I think they were trying to make themselves Horcruxes, before they died."

(***We have to protect ourselves, Pollux****—)*

"Dumbledore made it sound like it would be a secret," Harry said suspiciously.

Sirius leaned forward. "Harry, my family is as Dark as they come," he said, carefully and precisely. "Worse than the Malfoys. Worse than the Notts. Uncle Castor—he died because he tried to call upon the powers of the *dead* to augment his own magic. He was experimenting with *Necromancy.* When he died, Uncle Pollux tried to *bring him back*, and he killed himself in the process. Do you understand that?"

"But that's just your uncles—"

"My father had his enemies killed," Sirius continued, his voice growing louder. "Do you know why my aunt stopped having children, even though she only had three girls? She had a Squib baby and one day it *disappeared*, and she never had another child again. Riddle may

have fancied himself a Dark wizard, but he was just next in a long line of Dark wizards too stupid and arrogant to understand what they were doing. And even me, Harry. I almost killed Snivellus at sixteen, and I wish I'd succeeded. I would have torn apart Peter with my bare arms. I still would, if that slimy *rat* was ever in front of me—"

When Sirius stopped, his chest heaving, he dragged his eyes up to Harry's, and he saw with a palpable shock that his words had finally clawed their way into Harry's brain.

On Harry's face was fear, and it was directed at him.

***

They didn't celebrate Harry's birthday. Not really, not when Kreacher couldn't be induced into making a cake, and Harry seemed unwilling to acknowledge that he was now legally an adult wizard. They had been doing magic in Grimmauld anyway, magic shielded by the Black family wards, and Harry had never been one to celebrate his birthdays, particularly when he could not shake the feeling that he too would die at eighteen.

Hermione and Ron had managed to present Harry with gifts, anyway; Ron had found an old chess set in an upstairs room and painstakingly cleaned it until the gems on each knight shone proudly, and Hermione knit Harry a warm pair of socks that were almost sufficient to keep the tomb-like cold of Grimmauld's floors from staining his toes indelibly each night. Sirius didn't get Harry anything, though he took Harry into his father's study and gruffly informed him that he was planning on formally designating Harry his heir, if they survived this mess and could go to Gringotts to have the papers officially drawn up, but that he'd already added him to his will.

They didn't celebrate Harry's birthday, but as the night fell and the small party disbanded, Harry locked the door of his room, took a deep breath, and opened the diary back up.

Tom, there's something I need to tell you.

More lies, I expect.

You aren't the only wizard to have created Horcruxes.

That isn't possible.

Many of the Dark families might have. They could be gathering, ready to challenge your power.

You are lying to me in an attempt to scare me, Potter.

I'm not. I don't want them to be powerful either.

So what do you want me to do about it?

I need you to teach me how to find Horcruxes and destroy them.

You must think me a fool.

No. But you would not be able to challenge all of these wizards, Tom. They have old magic, family magic. I do not care about this diary, or your adult self. But someone I care about is being threatened by these other wizards. If you do not help me, I'll leave you in this house and nobody will ever find you.

The ink from his quill dripped softly onto his page. Outside his window, a crow scratched its beak against the crooked bow of the large English oak, and the house stirred uneasily around him. Perhaps Tom felt the magic, trapped inside the diary, and it gave Harry's words an air of authenticity. Perhaps he felt Harry's sincerity, his fear for Sirius, and he did not understand its source.

I will never help you, Potter .

But somewhere inside the diary, there was doubt, and Harry caught a strange echo of it in his body, and his fingers tingled in fear, or perhaps anticipation.

***

August 1997 // four months remaining

Sirius dreamt.

He looked at his companion, who stared back at him with wide, frightened eyes—

—and his companion looked back, and he pulled at his ears nervously. "Master," he croaked, but it was a goodbye and a plea and an expression of great sorrow all at once, and they both knew it in the same instance.

"Go," he said hoarsely. His mind swum with the memory of his many failures, and he felt the despair settle on his shoulders like a heavy, suffocating cloak, binding his movements and restricting his throat where the clasp would lay. He was eighteen years old and he had never been brave, and he was not brave now. He was scared, even more so because he had seen his soul flash in the air and knew it to be diseased, to be unsalvageable. He had not saved his brother, he had not saved his father, he would not be able to save his mother, but he would save his elf, who had cared for him more patiently and loyally than anyone else ever had or ever would again. "I order you, Kreacher. Go."

Kreacher choked back a sob. "Master Regulus…"

"I order you to go ***now****, without delay." The memory of the locket burned around the boy's neck, and he choked, a pained sort of noise that matched the garbled cry from his elf, who*

scrabbled desperately at the rock in an attempt to disobey a direct order. "Go, Kreacher, and don't tell anyone. Keep the locket safe. And—thank you."

Kreacher disappeared with a pained cry, and the boy was alone. He sank to his knees at the edge of the island, his hands squeezing painfully at his neck, though the locket had been taken from the cave. The cold, icy feel of Voldemort's magic washed around him, but underneath it, Regulus could sense an agitated thrumming that was familiar to him, familiar deep inside his bones.

He mustn't drink the water—he mustn't touch the water—he must try and keep his wits around him, now that Kreacher had taken the locket from him. Yet he was so thirsty, and his head throbbed so desperately, and he found his hand moving as if against his will to dip into the murky water and bring a sip to his lips.

One sip. He had one sip of clear, cool water against his burnt throat, sweeter than anything he had ever had in his life, and in that dark and awful cave, Regulus managed a smile. He was unlikely to evade detection; his Occlumency had always been poor, and it was a miracle he had even made it here, that he had found the locket and removed it from the cave. But Voldemort would need to believe that Regulus failed, that the duplicate locket that gleamed inside the basin was the real one.

When the Inferi reached a cool lily-white hand out of the water, Regulus' smile turned grim and knowing. "Go," he whispered again, but this time only to his magic, which curled and leapt from his body, unbridled for the first and last time, sweeping over the dark water and the bone-white limbs that were beginning to emerge like pale, ghostly apparitions. His magic vibrated against the power of the caves and dove under it, sparking angrily and furiously, and Regulus continued to smile as the Inferi reached out and grabbed at his wrist.

His magic screamed—

And Sirius screamed too, sitting upright in his bed, and the house screamed along with him and then sagged back, exhausted.

Harry burst into his room, wand blazing, followed by Hermione and Ron only seconds behind, but Sirius had already launched himself out of bed and was grabbing his robe from the floor, thrusting his hands savagely through each arm hole.

"Sirius, what—"

"The *elf,"* Sirius hissed, and the door behind Ron swung savagely and clanged against the peeling grey walls. "The bloody *elf*."

Hermione stepped forward, her eyes wide. "Kreacher?"

"He knew. This whole time, he knew." Sirius shouldered past the teenagers and took off for the kitchen, his feet thudding heavily against the carpeted stairs. He'd fallen on them before, skidded halfway to the bottom of the landing, but he had no fear now. The house would not prevent him, not when he was seeking answers he had every right to know. The house must

have sent him the dream; the house was *on his side*, it wanted him to know what happened to Regulus, it wanted him to know that they had been served by a traitor—

Sirius had his hands around Kreacher's neck before the memory of storming into the kitchen caught up to his mind. Kreacher's eyes were wide and glimmering and scared, and he widened them even further as Sirius shook Kreacher savagely back and forth. Behind him, he was faintly aware of Hermione scolding him, and Harry's urgent words, but Sirius did not pay attention to the interlopers in his home. This was a family affair, and Kreacher was something like family.

"The locket," Sirius snarled, and Kreacher let out an involuntary whimper. "*Give me the locket*."

"It is not here, Master—"

"I saw you!" Sirius howled, thrusting Kreacher away from him, so that the elf hit the opposite wall and slid slowly to the tiled floor. "I saw you and Regulus, Kreacher, I saw you in the cave. He told you to take it, he ordered you to keep it safe."

"And Kreacher *did!"* Kreacher shrieked back. His ears cocked urgently and his own magic began to swell, magic of the house and of the home, as he stood up against these accusations. "Kreacher kepts it safe, Master, Kreacher *dids.* Kreacher kepts it safe for Master Regulus, who died to save Kreacher."

Sirius clenched his hands into fists, so that he would not sock Kreacher where he stood. "You killed him. He died to save you."

"Yes," cried Kreacher simply, and Sirius sagged against the sharp look of pain in the elf's green, glossy eyes. Of course Regulus had died, so that Kreacher could live. Regulus was a bloody soft-hearted, pathetic excuse of a wizard, hadn't their father always said that, and worse? Sirius did not know why or how Kreacher had wound up in that cave with Regulus, but Regulus would have taken the potion, and Regulus would have ordered Kreacher away. If he had just asked Kreacher to *take him*, if he had asked Kreacher to take him to Sirius, if he had asked to be saved…

Faintly, absently, Sirius realised that he was sitting at the table, and there was a cup of tea in front of him. It was yesterday's tea, half-full, but someone had heated it so that it steamed anew, though Sirius had not seen anyone move. Next to him, Hermione crouched on the floor, Harry by her side, and they were listening soberly as Kreacher explained haltingly what had happened. The Dark Lord had asked for an elf…he had taken Kreacher to the caves, and bid him to drink the potion…

"Here," Ron said softly, and he pushed a scone toward Sirius from the platter on the sideboard. "You should eat something."

Sirius took it automatically, though he wanted to lash out angrily, Remus' face on Ron's, amber eyes layered over blue. "Where is it?" He asked abruptly, and Kreacher tensed and looked away. "Kreacher, I order you to tell me. Where is it?"

“The dirty thief,” croaked Kreacher, and he shut his eyes as if unable to bear the weight of Sirius’ rager. “He stole it all: Miss Bella’s and Miss Cissy’s pictures, my Mistress’s gloves, the Order of Merlin, First Class—”

Sirius' mind flitted around the options. "Who?"

"The dirty man, Master, the dirty one—*Dung*. He stole them all, Master.”

“Good,” Sirius interrupted cruelly. “Better have them gone than in the house. And he took the locket too?”

Kreacher wiped a bony hand against his nose but looked up to Sirius with something like defiance. “When Kreacher was looking after Master.”

Sirius felt strangely abashed, and he saw something glimmering in Kreacher’s eyes that he thought he recognised. *Neither of us wanted me to be the only one left*, he thought to himself irrationally. He felt suddenly tired, unable to muster the same energy as before.

“Harry,” Hermione said slowly, and Ron moved away from Sirius’ side at the low urgency in her tone. “Harry, the locket.”

“What?” Harry asked impatiently.

“There was a locket.” Hermione’s face shone with damp sweat and agitation, and she wiped her hands against her Muggle trousers. “The cabinet in the drawing room. Nobody could open it.”

Harry felt cold. Sirius stared up without much interest, but Harry felt as though his throat had seized shut and would not open. He had touched it; he had touched a part of Voldemort’s *soul*, and he had felt nothing. They all had. They had all handled it and felt nothing.

“Well, find him,” Harry insisted. He did not recognise his voice, and he ignored the uneasy looks that Ron and Hermione shared above his head. “Sirius, make Kreacher find him.”

“What does Master Sirius want with the locket?” Kreacher asked suspiciously.

“To destroy it,” Sirius said tiredly. He expected protestations, or even tears, but he did not expect Kreacher to lift his head and straighten his ears and say, “Good.”

***

The afternoon sun was curiously warm. Ron sat in the drawing room where he had once handled a piece of You Know Who's soul, and he observed in a drowsy, remote sort of way that the sun was quite *pretty,* the way it danced through the small, cramped room, lingering on the intricately carved cabinets built into the wall, fracturing by the smudged glass over the picture frames on the East-facing wall, and finally settling in a possessive puddle around his

feet. He was alone in the room; Harry had snapped so viciously at Hermione that she had succumbed to tears, a rare event in recent years, yet one that Ron knew intimately, and so he had judged it to be unwise to go after her until her door ceased smoking. Sirius was—off somewhere, muttering, and though the old portrait of Phineas Nigellus had passed through the empty frames a few minutes prior, the room was quiet.

Ron was, as all the Weasleys were, used to noise. The Burrow had been loud even when he and Ginny had been the only two left. There was always the wind whistling through the trees and the sounds of chickens fighting over the choicest seeds and the ghoul moaning in the attic. Harry had mentioned offhandedly that the constant creaking of the stairs and the dripping of water rolling off the cracked windowsills was driving him mad, but Ron could barely hear a thing. Grimmauld Place was *quiet*—and not in the least bit haunted.

It was just a house, a great big dirty house with magical creatures in the walls and hiding in the corners, but a house nevertheless. The Burrow had entertained its share of magical pests; Ron still vividly remembered the pixie infestation that Fred and George had caused, having trapped a pixie and kept it hostage in their room, and the ice worms that would creep into the warmth of their beds during particularly cold winters. Sometimes doors would bang shut or windows would rattle. It was just a fact of life, and one that neither Harry nor Hermione could truly understand, given their nonmagical upbringings.

Sirius ought to know, but Sirius had spent thirteen years in Azkaban, and he plainly wasn't in his right mind. He had told Harry that the house had hated him all his life, but his childhood had been years ago, and his parents had been cruel Dark wizards. Ron doubted it was the house that had hated Sirius, but it was hard to talk about your family. When Ron thought about how he'd left Ginny behind, it made him want to break something and blame it on ghosts too.

What worried Ron was not the house at all, but how Sirius and Harry seemed to orbit each other like dark, angry birds fighting over the same nest. What worried Ron was that Harry seemed not to want to talk about the other Horcruxes, even though they had five total to destroy and barely any clues to go on. What worried Ron was that Dumbledore had either known less than he let on, or he'd told Harry less than Harry deserved to know. Magical objects were magical objects, soul or no. Percy had lectured Ron on his magical theory enough that Ron knew that just as magic could protect or twist or warp or hide, so too could magic find or destroy or create or conjure. Surely *Dumbledore* knew of a way to find the Horcruxes beyond searching through the childhood memories of You Know Who.

It didn't seem to matter to anyone else, though, that Ron had his set of worries. It didn't seem to matter to anyone else that Ron listened anxiously to *Potterwatch* each day, relieved to hear his brothers' voices, relieved that his family was still alive. Harry didn't seem to want to listen, and Hermione only listened in an absent sort of way. They didn't understand the position that Ron was in.

Percy—Ron was beginning to think that perhaps Percy had had the right idea. He had thought through his thoughts on Percy and decided that he couldn't believe that Percy was a Death Eater, regardless of what Fred said scathingly on *Potterwatch*. Ron remembered how Percy had so patiently tutored him in chess, proofread all his essays for his first three years, forced

him to learn defensive magic, and gave him his old books, kept in pristine condition, all with helpfully labelled notes and references. He remembered Percy telling Harry to take tutorials in defensive magic. He remembered Percy's cold pragmatism, his derision of the Ministry's treatment of Harry, his sentiment that nothing was quite as it seemed with You Know Who's return. He remembered how much of a git Percy was, too—but Percy had always been observant, always careful, always deliberate. Percy was second in line to the Minister. Ron was locked away in a musty old house. He wouldn't be able to save anyone, given he couldn't even leave. Even if the locket was in the house, the rest of them were out *there*. Bill and Charlie. Fred and George. *Ginny*, alone in Hogwarts, facing off against the murderous Headmaster.

"Listen, Harry—"

"Look, Hermione, I'm *sorry*."

Their voices floated up the stairs and Ron closed his eyes, trying to continue enjoying the peace of the afternoon. Five more minutes of silence, and then Ron was going to go downstairs, sit Harry and Hermione down, and force them to make a plan for the others. They were going to destroy a Horcrux by Christmas.

Their voices grew fainter, and Ron was able to relax. Five more minutes, and then he would go downstairs.

The sun really was so very warm. The tree outside seemed to have shifted with the wind, so that the sunlight that came inside was unfiltered and smooth like soft butter. Ron found himself drowsing, even as the five minutes ticked past. He would go in a minute, he would—but he deserved some peace and quiet, if only to soothe his frazzled mind and quell some of the fear he always carried around with him.

Perhaps it could wait until tomorrow, after all.

***

Orion Black had never been particularly sentimental, and fatherhood did not particularly change him. There had been a moment, of course—a clench of the heart, the feeling that he'd inhaled without oxygen, the sudden rush of fear—when he'd first stared down at his pinched and furious son, tiny fists, incomprehensible scowl. Sirius had been born angry and he'd wasted no time in informing everyone, and Orion had looked down at his infant son and thought gladly, *good.*

He was lenient with Sirius, even as he held him to standards far harsher than his own father. Orion had been encumbered by strict bedtimes and a terrible governess and spoiled rotten by his soft, weak-willed mother. For Sirius he allowed him full control over his schedule, his meals, and his private pursuits, but in exchange he demanded excellence—and obedience.

And if he saw the rebellious spark in his son's eyes, heard that mutinous murmur in the back of his throat, Orion pushed harder, and Sirius pushed back.

Cygnus Black had been weaker than he ought to be, and Orion had always thought that perhaps it was his father who had let the curse fester below their floorboards, to creep up like vines in the middle of the night and grasp at the soft underside of their wrists, dangling over the side of the bed. Orion had not believed his two brothers when they had come to him and warned him, and he never quite changed his mind, even as whatever magic they experimented with eventually killed them both. Magic has rules, and they had disobeyed them and paid the appropriate cost.

And they didn't understand. Orion didn't understand, not until his own father died and he was alone in the house, his wife away unexpectedly to her own family, his two sons not yet born. The night was a still one, a little damp, far too quiet, and Orion found himself sweating as he ate silently in the large dining room. He snapped at his elf but the cooling charms only stirred up the moist mud from where it had collected on the floor, sending the decaying smell of leaves spiralling softly through the air. Even the moonlight seemed odd; not harsh or blinding or bright, but a strange, muted glow at the edges of the large smudged windows. Orion made a mental note to have the new elf, Kreacher, begin on them at once. He stomped upstairs, some old instinct pushing at him to make noise, to press deliberately into the creases in the stairs.

There were no ghosts in Grimmauld Place. Orion had (privately, sheepishly) hired a wizard to make sure. They had scanned the place top to bottom, bottom to top, and laid out all the old remedies (iron shavings in small piles on the third stair from the bottom, rue and harrow wheat hanging in bundles on the south facing windows, oil smeared on the doorknobs) as extra precautions. A load of nonsense, but the wizard came highly recommended, and Orion trusted his sharp, ratty eyes and thick, stubby wand.

Yet alone, Orion felt a chill, and inside his bedroom he heard three slow knocks upon the door, like the old story his mother had told them, of Death peering his head into the room and requesting his due. But Orion did not owe anyone *anything,* least of all Death, least of all the magic that lived in this home.

"No," he said out loud, his voice childish, suddenly, devoid of the trappings of his luxurious title. "I refuse to be haunted."

To be haunted was so *plebian.* Orion had already spent the requisite money to ensure the smell of rot that wafted from the basement was due to the dead carcass of some creature or another. There have been a vampire when Orion was very young, skulking around the same basement; Alphard had been enthralled by it, and Castor and Pollux wary, but Orion had never allowed himself to get close to it, waiting impatiently for his father to evict the damn thing. Walburga never would have married him if she'd known about it.

The smell now was not due to a vampire, or even anything particularly magical. "Probably a stray Kneazle," the wizard had said, offhandedly. "They go nosing around these old houses and get trapped in the wards. They've got enough magic to get in, but not enough to get out."

It would take a few days for the smell to clear, the wizard had assured Orion. Yet that had been a week ago, and Orion was on the highest floor (self-consciously occupying his father's bedroom, despite himself), and it smelled like the cat had died beneath his bed.

Orion felt a sudden surge of anger. The Parkinson manor was large and ornate, filled with ugly gold statues and expensive portraits of their ancestors. The Malfoy Manor was even larger, a tangle of rooms across a large plot of land in Wiltshire, and the last Malfoy wife even had taste, so it was pleasant to be in, even if Abraxas was a tosser and his son even more so. Even the *Notts* could sleep without the smell of rot in their noses, or so Orion presumed.

It felt like only *he* had to put up with this, for all the Black fortune and fame. He had to be afraid that the rustling outside was a ghost, and the pain in his chest was a curse, and the eerie, slow scratch down the windowpane outside was a gnarled, curled finger, rather than a branch of the nearby tree. And for what?

"It gives us power," his father had said, the only time Orion had dared to speak to him of it. "***You must be worthy of it, and you must stay within its bounds***."

Power. Despite Orion's burgeoning fear, and deep-set unease, he let out a small, bitter chuckle. He had his own power, power in his blood and his mind and the magic that sparked at his fingertips. He did not need any protection that this musty old house gave him, or any power summoned up from the blood-soaked mud underneath. Walburga was trying to get pregnant; the second she began to swell with his child, he was taking her away, building her a mansion on a land nicer than Wiltshire, and he'd leave Grimmauld Place to his freak brothers and let them rot into the ground.

The door creaked open, and the curse hummed happily around the corners of the house as Orion screamed.

(Ten months later, Sirius was born, and the family had not moved, and Orion felt fear and gladness at the angry clench of his son's fists. If he was bound, it was only because his son was too.)

***

They had not found the locket, but they *had* found something, yet Sirius was less cheered than the others at the news. The night after he dreamed of Regulus, he dreamed of Bella, twisting under Voldemort's wand as he punished his most loyal follower for her cousin's treachery. But in his dreams, it seemed that Voldemort had not known Regulus stole the locket, nor what had happened to him; standing invisibly in the memory, feet stuck to the ground, Sirius had enough presence of mind to realise that Voldemort thought that Bella had helped spirit away Regulus and was punishing her for his desertion, rather than his betrayal.

It unsettled Sirius. Voldemort should have known that Bella would never have chosen him over Regulus. Bella had loved Voldemort more than her family, her husband, her own

freedom. She'd barely tolerated Regulus, who'd always been too quiet and tame to interest Bella. Voldemort ought to have known that.

It *also* implied that perhaps Voldemort did not know that Regulus had stolen the locket. Oddly, that unsettled Sirius too. Of course, the knowledge that Voldemort's power was not absolute, that they had a chance to slip under his nose, or lack thereof—*that* felt good, and Sirius took great pleasure in it, though he didn't yet tell Harry. (He could not say that he had *dreamed* of it. He would have discounted it himself, if not for the fact that every fibre of his mind had insisted he was somehow viewing Bella's memory, if not for the fact that this sort of thing had happened when Sirius was young, though he did not quite remember it fully now.)

But if Regulus had been talented enough at eighteen years old to discover the locket, and find the bloody thing, and spirit it away from Voldemort, and conceal it for the next twenty or so years…

Sirius scowled to himself, eyes tracing over the familiar cracks in the ceiling. There was the large one that snaked menacingly through the light fixture, and the two smaller ones that branched to either side, and he forced his eyes to linger on them. He had asked Regulus to come with him, and Regulus had refused. Regulus had always been good at his studies but weak-willed and unfocused. Sirius couldn't have known he had turned because Regulus had been too cowardly to tell him. His death wasn't Sirius' fault. It was not on his hands. That he had been talented enough that perhaps he could have escaped, if Sirius had tried harder was immaterial—

"Sirius," gasped Harry, skidding into the room. Sirius shook himself awake. The light flickered and he blinked away the beginnings of a headache, refocusing on his godson. Harry had been moody of late, secretive and angry, but Sirius could not blame him. He of all people understood what Harry was feeling, and he of all people understood that the best remedy when one was feeling bitterly angry was to have someone sit quietly by your side, peacefully doing their own thing, but exuding a sense of warm understanding. Sirius was no Remus, but he had years of examples to pull from, and he did his very best. He'd barely made it through the last book that Remus was reading, a somewhat dry tome on defensive spells, but he'd forced himself through it and had sat next to Harry all that time and listened quietly to Harry's intermittent grumbles.

Doing my best, Moony, Sirius thought again now as he waited for Harry to gather himself. He didn't quite like how angry Harry had become. Harry bristled—there was no other word to describe it. There was a persistent tension that lined all of Harry's muscles and added an extra snap to his words.

"*Umbridge,*" Harry finally spit out, his lips trembling, and his fist clenched so tightly that Sirius, for the first time, noticed a web of thin scars over the back of his hand. He began to rise, instinctively, and on the ceiling, a third crack slithered through the plaster to join the others. "Fucking *Umbridge.*"

"What happened to your hand?" Sirius insisted, diverted. "Are those from that *detention?* "

Harry had told him about it—but he hadn't mentioned his hand was still scarred, over a year later. Sirius caught at Harry's hand and held it firmly over Harry's instinctive flinch, nearly leaning over the edge of the bed in an attempt to hold on. "Umbridge has the locket," Harry spat out, and Sirius dropped his hand as if burned. Above, the cracks hardened, so that the words etched across the ceiling matched those on Harry’s hand.

The story came tumbling out as Harry and Sirius skidded down the stairs, Harry improbably dressed in robes despite the early hour, and Sirius still in the Gryffindor Quidditch shirt he wore to bed these days. Ron and Hermione were already in the kitchen; Hermione was crouched by the table, speaking in low, soothing tones to Kreacher, who was alternating between glaring at her and bludgeoning his head on the floor.

"Stop," Sirius said, and all occupants of the kitchen froze with surprise at the sudden steel of authority in his voice and the cold nip of magic that accompanied it. "What is happening?"

"The dirty thief," began Kreacher, cowering away from his master. "He must have lost it, Master, but Kreacher found the locket again—with *her*.” He jabbed a wrinkled finger at the newspaper in Ron’s hands.

Sirius blinked in surprise. Ron, standing closest, noticed the way that Sirius seemed to automatically flare his nose, straighten his shoulders, and purse his lips, so that regardless of the lines of sleep marring his face, he looked coolly unaffected and entirely impenetrable. Ron had the sudden intrusive thought that he was jealous. He had never been able to control his features, and everyone always seemed to know precisely what he was thinking. "Dolores Umbridge," Sirius said thoughtfully—and dangerously. Kreacher raised his head as he felt the house pulse excitedly around them. The house had been quiet, of late, except for in the night, when it sent dreams to poor Kreacher, curled in his bed of rags. Dreams of his master, first Orion and then Regulus, of the way their faces looked as they died, the strange, stretched out skin over their harsh, unforgiving bones. Kreacher dreamed that he too was falling in the lake, that dirty, nasty water, that Master Regulus was the one strangling him for his failures, that he was glad to die to save his master, that he was ready to end his miserable life, but he could not, not in this house, not until his master let him go. "Dung wouldn't have sold it to Umbridge."

"She's the head of something," Ron pointed out cautiously. He didn't notice, but he had moved instinctively to shield Hermione, his body inserted between hers and Sirius', so that she had to crane her neck impatiently to see what was happening. Harry, still in the doorway, was silent and seething. "It's in the *Prophet*."

Sirius took the newspaper when Ron pushed it across the table and winced as it sliced through his thumb. The smear of blood slid off the thin paper and dropped, nearly invisibly, onto the floor, where it seemingly disappeared from sight. Ron read the *Prophet* cover to cover each day; Hermione had happily delegated the task to him, understanding with a flash of insight that he was searching for the names of his family, and taken herself instead to the library to continue searching for Ravenclaw's artefact. She had compiled a list but was beginning to be stymied by the lack of information surrounding the Ravenclaw family after Helena had died.

There she was. Dolores Umbridge, her sickening sweet smile. Sirius had never met her personally, but he felt like he recognised her. She seemed to be looking right at him, her small printed form turning to watch him through the paper, and around her neck gleamed Slytherin's locket.

Mine, snarled a voice inside Sirius' head, and all five occupants of the kitchen looked up in surprise at a crash sounding above their heads.

"Stay," barked Sirius, and Kreacher bit his lip as he warred with his dual impulses. He did not understand what happened—the magic had not been his master's, but it had been familiar, too, and Kreacher felt suddenly unsettled. His ears bowed close to his head.

"She must have confiscated it," Harry said. Hermione frowned at him. He was leaning against the door in a manner more reminiscent of Draco Malfoy than Harry, and she didn't like it. He was mourning Dumbledore, and they all knew it, but Harry had made great strides with his anger since the Umbridge year, and she didn't like to see all of their hard work ruined in an instant. Not for the first time, Hermione wished they could have spirited Ginny away too. She seemed to be the only one who could snap Harry out of his belligerence, though Ron was doing his damndest best, and oddly enough, so was Sirius.

"Do you think it's controlling her?" Ron asked hesitantly, flicking a glance toward Harry, who ignored it. Harry had only written twice more in the diary, and both times, Tom had ignored him.

Sirius came to the end of the article and scowled, his teeth pulled back in an expression that would not have looked out of place on Padfoot's face. "Depends on how much of an evil bitch she is without it," he said, tossing the paper back on the table. "She's heading up the *Muggleborn Registration Committee*. You're mentioned, Hermione; apparently you've been delinquent in showing up to your trial."

Hermione flushed angrily and picked up the article, scanning for her name. "She was a bitch even before the locket," she spat out, ignoring Harry and Ron's flinches at the unexpected curse from her mouth. "I wouldn't be surprised if the locket had nothing to do with this. And she hates me, anyway, after what I did to her."

Sirius spotted the slight smirk that curved Hermione's lips at the memory and thought approvingly, *good.* He still had no frame of reference for Hermione, particularly as he got to know her better and came to learn that she was nothing like Narcissa, but he thought that she and Lily would likely have been friends. Lily could be unforgiving, too, and as mean as Sirius when she bent her mind to it. It had been one reason why she and Sirius had circled each other so uncomfortably for the first few months of her relationship with James. She had not known how to speak to him, now that she was ostensibly friends with him and could no longer chide him in the half-annoyed, half-amused tone that she tended to default to with the boys in the house, and he could no longer respond glibly and rudely without offending James. It had taken them til the winter holidays, when James had insisted Lily and Sirius be paired for the annual snowball match that inevitably spilled into the castle and pulled all onlookers inexorably into its orbit, that they found that they recognised each other's vicious edges, that there was a shared recognition of the streak of meanspiritedness that ran underneath their

kindness and loyalty. James had been thrilled to find that they were thereafter able to be friends without conflict.

The memory of James broke Sirius out of some of his anger, and upstairs, the chandelier floated itself back to the ceiling and attached itself to the wiring. Kreacher relaxed, part of his burden released, and resumed watching Sirius warily, attuned to the currents in the room, even if he could not have explained in words what they all meant.

“Your brother’s mentioned in this, too,” Hermione said, looking up to Ron. “Percy.”

“*Percy?”*

“He’s overseeing the trials, as a representative of the Minister.” Hermione raised an eyebrow. “Percy’s gotten a promotion, it looks like.”

“Bloody opportunistic git,” said Ron, but without any heat. “Maybe we can steal the list of names from him.”

“The names?”

“Well there must be a list of names, right? Some list of *Undesirables* that Umbridge is following. I bet Percy knows where it is. Maybe if we steal it from him it’ll fuck up their little system.”

“Do you think he’d give it to us?” Hermione asked thoughtfully, her attention caught by the idea.

“Not bloody likely,” Ron said fairly. Either Percy was indeed an evil little git, in which case he wouldn’t be likely to cooperate with them, or he was opportunistically pretending to be, in which case he wouldn’t be able to openly help them. “But I bet we can steal it, can’t we?”

“Why stop at the names?” Harry interjected with an unexpected touch of mischief. Sirius looked at him in surprise; only after hearing his voice suddenly so alive could Sirius recognise how deadened and drab Harry had been all month. “Let’s rip the locket right off her neck. We know where she is. We know what it looks like. And if she stole it from Dung, she’s not likely to report it missing.”

For a moment, all four of them are silent. Kreacher stared up at them with wide eyes, nearly holding his breath, as the idea began to flicker in their minds. He did not dare say what he wished: that it was Sirius’ duty to steal the locket back, his duty to his brother to destroy it. Something told Kreacher he did not need to say the words out loud, anyway, even if he dared.

“It’s not safe for you to leave,” said Sirius finally, but more automatically than anything. “The Ministry will be locked down like a prison.”

“I can’t stay locked up here forever, Sirius,” Harry said quietly. “Six Horcruxes, and only one destroyed already. We’ve got to find the others.” He hesitated and then reached into his

pocket and withdrew the small black diary, battered and stained. “Dumbledore gave me this, as a last resort.”

Sirius swallowed. His throat was suddenly dry, and he felt a roaring in his ears. “You have had this in my house this entire time?”

“I haven’t written in it,” said Harry quickly. “Dumbledore told me not to try to speak to Tom until we had to.”

Sirius staggered backward, and Harry darted quickly around him, so it was now Sirius whose back was against the cool draft from outside the door, and Sirius who scrabbled for purchase against the doorframe. There was a whisper, from the book, and a gust of air that swirled around their feet, and a laugh that Sirius recognised from his dreams, and a cold burning sensation around his throat. He was ten, suddenly, and his uncles were lifting their heads angrily to stare at him. He was twelve and he was kneeling in a muddy field, and Regulus was next to him, and his hand was bleeding. ***I claim a wish for this family with the blood of my heirs***. He was fifteen and his heart seized inside his chest and he felt panicked, and he knew suddenly that if he were to stay inside this house, he would die, and his father would die soon, and his grandfather had died, and they would all die, because the magic of the house demanded a cost, and they were unable to pay it, and it was growing greedy and impatient as it waited for an heir worthy of its power. ***The Black family needs an heir*****,** Regulus said, and Sirius turned his mind away from his brother’s voice, and exchanged horrified eye contact with Kreacher, who for the first time in over a decade met his gaze without hatred.

“That is not welcome in my home,” said Sirius, and he did not recognise his own voice. “You must destroy it, Harry.”

“Or I won’t be welcome either?”

Ron and Hermione were silent as Harry faced off with Sirius, his hand clutched protectively around the diary.

“You lied to me, Harry.”

“Dumbledore—”

“*Dumbledore* trusted me with this mission, Harry, *”* Sirius spit out. “And you have to trust me.”

“Dumbledore trusted *me*—”

“You are a child!” Sirius roared, surprising them all. In a quieter voice, he continued, his chest heaving, “You are my *godson*, Harry. I promised James. I promised him the day that you were born that I would protect you like you were mine.”

Harry was silent. His grip loosened on the diary, and his eyes widened behind his glasses. “What do you mean?”

“I was there at your *birth*, Harry.” Sirius shook his head, feeling very tired and very old. Hermione covered her mouth and clutched at Ron, who squeezed her hand, his eyes steady on Sirius. “James was a mess—Lily kicked him out of the room in the morning, and he just went around making a fool of himself. Moony and I had to all but sit on him so that he wouldn’t burst into the room.”

“You were all there?” Harry whispered.

Sirius smiled, and to his bewilderment, it hurt to stretch his lips over his teeth. “Of course we were there, Harry,” he said simply. “We were there the next day, too, after you’d come out screaming. James nearly passed out. Lily was—she was so beautiful, Harry. She took one look at you and burst into tears.”

“Did it hurt her?”

“Oh, I’m sure it hurt.” Sirius grinned at the memory. Lily had screamed some particularly questionable things at James, who had nodded eagerly at each one. “But that’s not why she cried, Harry.”

“Why—why did she cry?”

Harry looked close to tears himself, Sirius noticed, and his voice softened when he replied. “Because she was so happy. Because we all were. It was the beginning of the war, like it is now. We were all locked up in our houses, we were all scared, everyone kept *dying*. And in the middle of all of that, you appeared, and we were so happy.”

Harry was silent, and the kitchen echoed with it.

“So you understand, Harry, that I can’t just let you write in that thing.” Sirius searched for the prick of anger that had consumed him so thoroughly just minutes prior and found to his surprise that he could not find it. “Dumbledore trusted us both, and we need to trust each other, or we’re finished. You said he told you not to write in it until it’s a last resort; well, it isn’t. We’ll get the locket from Umbridge, and we’ll destroy it, and then we’ll find the next one.”

After a long, torturous silence, Harry nodded, and Sirius exhaled in relief.

But Ron was watching carefully, and he noticed that Harry had never promised anything out loud.

Chapter End Notes

An excerpt from a relevant poem for those of you who like poetry - I'll post the full version on my Tumblr.

A Father at His Son's Baptism
Amy Gertsler
[...]
—tail-less, your cloudy gaze a vague accusation,
not of the sins of my history, but ignorance
to come, future cruelty. You're getting red
in the face, blotchy, ready to wail. Good.
From now on protest and remember everything.
[...]
It might be best to set you down
in one of those squares of light on the floor,
striped by venetian blinds, and leave you safe
in that bright cage. I could go have coffee,
and come back when we can carry on
a conversation. Men and women are afraid
of each other. It's true. Whisper
and drool of my flesh, I'm terrified of you.

Escape

Chapter Notes

> Haven't forgotten about this for the four of you that are reading it! Real life just keeps on getting in the way.
>
> If you'd like to say hi, I'm on Tumblr at the same username and recently learned how to view my asks :)

Chapter 5: Escape

September *1997 // three months remaining*

Hermione sighed, pursed her lips, and sighed again, blowing a sticky, sweaty strand of hair out of her face. She did not enjoy brewing Polyjuice; she didn't enjoy its foul smell nor its slow, languorous pops, each releasing noxious smoke into the air. She didn't enjoy how finicky it was—she had to check on it *constantly,* and given she didn't trust Ron or Harry to report promptly on its condition, it meant she had to peer her way uncomfortably into Sirius' uncles' lab several times a day. She didn't enjoy that Sirius insisted on accompanying her, if he caught sight of her trudging up the stairs, and she didn't enjoy that he was probably right, given some of what he'd told her about said uncles. Today was her birthday, and she allowed herself a full moment of spoiled sorrow. Her seventeenth birthday had been a wizarding affair: she'd turned seventeen just after their sixth year began, and as was tradition, she'd celebrated her coming of age with nearly the entirety of Gryffindor House. It had not mattered that she was not the most popular, nor that she was nearly a year older than her peers, nor that she was a Muggleborn; a witch's seventeenth birthday was special, and there had been cake and colourful crackers for the whole Common Room, and Professor McGonagall had even given her a card, as she did to every student of her House for their majority, and Hermione had thrilled with fizzy joy the entire day. But her eighteenth birthday would have been a Muggle celebration, or so she'd promised herself. She'd hoped, at one time, that perhaps she could get permission to go into London, or have her parents in Hogsmeade. The war, of course, made those dreams impossible—but a small part of her had hoped for *something*, anything, to designate that she'd finally reached adulthood in both of her worlds. She hadn't mentioned it to either of her friends, and she was expecting them to remember in two bursts of guilty surprise in a few days, when her tantrum was over, and she could smile magnanimously and assure them that she'd hardly spared a thought for it herself.

Most of all, Hermione didn't enjoy that they were planning on breaking into the Ministry of Magic with nothing more than a vague plan of attack. Oh, they had details—the colour of the robes, the layout of the offices, which poor woman was slated for trial that day—but they didn't know anything about Umbridge except that she would be in the trial room at ten after three, overseeing a gross miscarriage of justice. That these uncertainties were what

necessitated such a risky plan did not improve Hermione's mood. She felt strongly that there ought to be some alternative solution; couldn't they merely hide in the dark and kidnap Umbridge on her way back from work? But, as it had all too many times before, her lack of familiarity with the Wizarding World hampered her. Umbridge might take the Floo, but Hermione couldn't guess where her house would be located, or what kinds of wards she would have. She couldn't guess which restaurant Umbridge would frequent on a Friday night, or who she might be consorting with the next day. She didn't know which wizards would be the most likely to be close to her, or assigned to her staff, and given they were stuck in this miserable house, they were unlikely to get these answers easily.

Sirius could have known these things, or Ron—but both claimed ignorance, Sirius because his information was over a decade out of date, and Ron because, quick frankly, his family was not esteemed enough to be included in the gossip.

"Play to our strengths," Harry had said, and he and Hermione had locked gazes over the table, both remembering the frantic series of days where they had worked together to defeat a dragon on the same bit of advice. Her strength had been both the mastery of the spell and her ability to hammer it into Harry's head through sheer force of will, while his strength had been his innate gifts in the air. Perhaps this situation was not so different after all. "Hermione, you can brew Polyjuice, and we're all good at sneaking around."

Sirius, with his eyes bright and laughing, and Harry, pulled out of the gravity of his sadness by the reminder of who Sirius was to him—

Hermione should be pleased, but the anxious, pragmatic part of her brain that was often her greatest asset whispered to her that they were both thinking of it as a lark, the Marauders sneaking into the Ministry, and it was only she, *only she,* tasked with keeping them alive.

(Each time that she climbed the stairs, she felt more breathless at the top, as if they grew beneath her, an endless twist of vine and thorn, and she would spend the rest of her life trudging up them fruitlessly, never able to reach the top, never willing to go back to the bottom).

***

There were other dreams, while the Polyjuice brewed. Sirius dreamed of Castor and felt with surprise the possessive, weighty thread of his relationship to his twin brother. He watched as Pollux watched Castor die, and he experienced Pollux's flare of exhilarating thrill—*freedom,* thought Pollux, who had never been alone—before the sorrow crept in and never moved out.

He dreamt of Alphard and he saw his father, bristling, angry, and unaccountably young, threatened by his youngest brother, posturing and insecure. Sirius looked like Orion. Sirius had known that, but it was still different to see his father’s face, screwed into youthful defiance, to see his father’s expressions on his own face in the mirror the next morning. In one dream, Sirius hovered at the outskirts of Pollux' body as Pollux warned Orion. (It had

surprised Sirius, even in the midst of the dream, that Pollux would think to warn his brother). Pollux had looked tired and gaunt, just days after his brother's death, but his voice had not wavered as he explained to Orion that they had plumbed the depths of their power in an attempt to escape the Black family curse, but they had failed, and it would consume Orion next if he did not heed Pollux's warning.

The curse calls to me, said Pollux, and he straightened his shoulders and showed no hint of embarrassment, even at Orion's rolled eyes. Power demanded a cost, he'd explained, and though Castor had paid, Pollux had not yet given his due, and neither had Orion. (They did not mention Alphard, who was out of the country. Sirius, watching, wondered at this—why neither brother believed the curse would call to their youngest sibling, whether Alphard had paid his cost, or not been considered valuable enough to extort).

My magic feels heavy, Pollux had said, his eyes flicking about warily. ***It feels cold. And sometimes—it feels foreign***.

Orion had scoffed, as Sirius had too, back in his own body, while the house thrummed around him purposefully. One's magic could not feel like anything other than one's own. Even in Azkaban, Sirius had recognised the way his magic collected mutedly between his fists, though the chains that ensnared him tempered his power. Even as Padfoot, Sirius knew who he was.

And if his magic sometimes did feel heavy, or did feel cold, it was because of the blood that ran through his veins. It was because the Black name was a burden and a curse, and only the worthy could stand the heavy taint of their power. It was why so many Blacks had gone mad. Sirius' mother had told him and Regulus both, many times; only a proper, skilled, extraordinary young wizard could be in command of the Dark magic that brimmed eagerly beneath the surface and leapt to attention when called. There were no Light Black wizards because their magic was indelibly Dark, and to fight against their nature (this, always directed at Sirius) was nothing short of foolhardy.

(First born, first to fail, whispered the house. ***Blind is as blind does****.)*

Sirius had always disagreed, but he'd begun to change his mind of late, softly, without fanfare. He'd always thought he could make his mark as a Light wizard, but he'd never been able to master any of the Light Arts save for perhaps Transfiguration, and he'd always come second to James or Remus in school in everything except Potions. There was anger in him, pain and hatred and a deep-seated rage, and as he dreamed he saw his uncles with the same rage, and his father too. Perhaps he'd been fooling himself into thinking he ought to deny his nature. Regulus had been a Dark wizard and he'd stolen a piece of the Dark Lord's soul. Uncle Alphie had been a Dark wizard, and he'd been the best man Sirius had known, save for Albus. Andy was a Dark witch, presumably, and she'd raised Nymphadora Tonks.

Perhaps all he had to do was to use the power that hovered in the back of his mind without succumbing to the madness at its heels. Sirius did not feel mad. He had lived on the boundary of madness for thirteen years, and he was familiar with how it felt, and he knew when it began to cloud the corners of his mind. For Sirius, madness was beget by powerlessness and rage, and he didn't feel powerless, not now, not with one of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes so close at hand. He felt determined, not angry, and his mind was curiously clear.

He wasn’t angry at Voldemort. Cruelty was as in Voldemort’s nature as it had been in any of Sirius’ ancestors, and raging against the inevitable was futile and childish. He wasn’t even angry at Snape anymore, at least, not in the spitting-hot way that he would have been in the past. Sirius had vowed to kill Snape, and he would, in time. The burning, impetuous rage had cooled into an icy simmer, like a glacier in the sea, moving with heavy solemnity and biding its time.

I can do this, Sirius realised after one such night of dreams, and he sat up in bed and stared at the dark expanse of the opposite wall. The curtains fluttered open in the still, windless night and let in a pale stream of moonlight. Sirius turned his face unconsciously, so that his profile was bathed in the light, and his eyes were caught by the crystallisation of ice at the corner of the window, like a spider web that had frozen in time. *I can do this.*

Having a plan helped. Practising magic with Harry helped. Listening to Ron's hearty laugh as he beat Hermione in chess helped—as did the sight of little twittering birds circling around Ron's head, pecking at him playfully. They three were young, and that helped Sirius too, though he did not know it. For a brief period, an exhale echoed through the house, and all was still.

When finally it was the morning of their planned excursion, they met in the kitchen for breakfast, meeting each other's eyes like war wizards at council. Even Kreacher was included, or at least was present, and Sirius noticed with a start of surprise that his least favourite elf had begun to wear a neatly pressed towel, rather than his typical rags.

"We know the plan," said Sirius, feeling as if it were his responsibility to send them into battle. A stray beam of sunlight shifted and illuminated the large oak table, and Sirius faltered. It was actually clean in the kitchen, cleaner than Sirius could ever remember it being, and as he looked down at his cup of coffee, he realised it was made to his liking, rather than being thick and bitter. He glanced at Kreacher, who avoided his eyes, busying himself with serving Hermione—*Hermione*—a plate of toast and eggs.

The doubt curdled. The house was not particularly safe, but it had been quiet, recently, and nearly pleasant. They had long since discovered the post of Death Eaters outside their door, though Sirius forbade them from hexing them even through the narrow sixth floor window, and the last episode of *Potterwatch* had soberly reported the new Taboo on You Know Who's name. Severus Snape was *Headmaster*—Sirius' lip curled, before he remembered the cold glint of moonlight on the icy window, and forced the feeling down—and the Ministry was run by an Imperiused fool. Malfoy and Nott and Yaxley strutting ‘round like peacocks, the faces of his friends plastered on *Wanted* posters on the walls, like his face had been for years.

He couldn't let them leave. He couldn't let them go out into the open—

Keep them safe**,** said Albus, said James—

He ought to be contacting Remus or the rest of the Order, not this group of teenagers, looking up at him expectantly—

The window clattered as a sudden gust of wind brought the nearby tree to scrape menacingly against the glass. Sirius swallowed. The house was safe. Whatever else it was, it was safe.

Hadn't that been why they had stayed so many years, why generations of Blacks had paid the price for their safety? Had James kept Harry in the Potter manor, so much would have been different. Safety was worth the cost, worth the pain, worth the sacrifice.

But the house would need *him.* Sirius had designated Harry his heir, but Harry was not of his blood, and Sirius had not performed any of the rituals, nor taught Harry how to take command of the wards. Narcissa or her spawn could waltz right in if Sirius died. He should have asked Andy for help. Perhaps they could delay and could complete the ritual before they left, so that they would be safe if he died—

"Sirius," said Harry, firmly but not unkindly. "We know the plan. We can't stay here. We need to get to the locket."

"We do not all need to go," began Sirius, but he faltered again at the look in Ron's eyes, and the scowl marring Hermione's face. How could he choose which of them to risk—or which of them to leave behind?

"We know the plan." Ron next, his voice steady, though he had fretted away most of the night, imagining his father being forced to watch his public execution. Ron thought again, facing off with Sirius, that he had the most to lose out of any of them here. His tenuous claim to the Sacred Twenty Eight would not save him if he were seen in company with Harry Potter; he would be murdered like the rest of them if he were caught. What made it worse was that his family would be punished. Even if Harry or Hermione were caught instead of him, his family would be punished. Last night, unable to sleep in the sticky lethargic heat of the room, Ron had thought of Percy, his face twisted angrily behind his glasses, warning their father that they would all be at risk for harbouring Harry so openly, and he had wished suddenly that they had kept their association with Harry a secret, that he'd at least told Ginny not to date Harry publicly, at least until the war was over.

But still. Ron had thought all these things and many of them were true, but he still raised his chin and firmed his grip around his wand, the stubborn expression and jut of his chin suddenly all Andy, and Sirius was reminded that he and Ron shared a great-grandfather. At least he had something like family by his side.

Sirius looked at Harry next and then sighed. "We stick to the plan," he warned them all solemnly. They looked back at him, and he was struck by the fear that glimmered just out of reach behind all of their teenaged eyelashes, long and frayed. He mustered up a smile, a shade of his cocky self. "And by the evening, we'll have the locket, and who knows? Maybe we'll get lucky, and by then, Umbridge will be dead."

(Later, safely in his bed, Sirius thought of his words and wondered uncomfortably if he'd foretold Umbridge's death. The papers announced she was killed by a dangerous Mudblood, but Sirius could fill in the blanks himself. Either the Dementors had got her, or the Dark Lord. He felt a fierce, savage gladness—but he felt an obscure sense of guilt too, and a feeling of regret).

***

They arrived with a crack on a quiet section of sidewalk outside the Ministry, already invisible and shielded. Sirius' nostrils flared as he breathed in the fresh air, and for a moment he turned his face upright to meet the sun. There were fewer wizards queuing up to the entrance than Sirius remembered, and most them had stressed, harried looks, and there were a few types that looked downright thuggish—but there were *people*, they were in some ways *his* people, wizards at least, people who his brain automatically tabulated and categorised. A priggish woman with a tight updo was certainly a Parkinson, judging from the harsh line of her upturned nose. Her companion was not only a Healrock, he was the Healrock in Sirius' year. The two twins jostling for space over by the door were the Patils, cousins—no, uncles to the Patil twins that Harry and Ron had taken to the Yule Ball.

Sirius thought with a sudden flash of insight that even if the house *was* perfectly inert and benign, still he would be feeling relief from the belligerent malaise that so characterised his multi-year house arrest. Merlin, it felt good to be outside.

He saw a glimmer of light in the opposite alley where they had agreed to meet and shook himself awake (*awake, aware, alive*), hurrying to join the others. He nearly stepped on Harry's foot and elbowed Ron in the cheek before they established little pockets of air to each inhabit invisibly. Sirius was surprised by how sharp he felt. The buzz that he remembered from his Auror training days kicked alive and hummed encouragingly in his mind. His grip on his wand was steady, and he knew even before he pointed it at his chosen victim that the spell would be perfect: silent, straight, and just strong enough to summon the wizard to their corner.

The Imperius felt good. Sirius did it again, and again, and one last time, as discussed. He had not allowed any of the others to try, and in truth had been concerned with his ability to overcome so many minds. But the spell was easy. Their minds were soft and compliant, and they stood quietly as Sirius ordered them to undress and conceal themselves in the alley.

"Nicely done," said Harry encouragingly as Sirius returned with the hairs in tow. A potion bottle appeared and floated through the air, gripped by Hermione's invisible hand, and Sirius took it and dropped the first hair in.

His Polyjuice tasted like dirty, congealing sweat, and he grimaced around it as he swallowed. But he remained stoic, his face perfectly impassive, even as the potion forcibly rearranged his features. The thrilled exhilaration had not left him. He felt he was noticing details he would otherwise have missed, enmeshed in the soporific walls of his childhood home, and his mind felt sharp and agile as a result.

Each dropped their invisibility charms—or in Harry’s case, stepped out from the protective embrace of James’ cloak—as the Polyjuice settled them into their new identities. Sirius examined each face carefully until he was content they looked exactly like their victims and possessed no traces of their former selves. He had not doubted Hermione, but Polyjuice was notoriously fickle, and Harry and Ron had teased Hermione rather relentlessly about her earlier feline mishap. Sirius did not want to take any chances.

“Perfectly done,” he said gruffly. Hermione’s smile was smug even with Mafalda Hopkirk’s pale red lips. “Let’s go.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Harry said, looking around fiercely at each of them. “We’re going to be fine.”

“Come here, if you need to flee,” said Sirius in reply. “If you feel you may be compromised or if your instincts are twinging at you. We all have an additional dose of Polyjuice, so we have two total hours before we will need to return to safety.”

Without speaking further, they left in their assigned groups: Hermione as Mafalda, following closely behind Ron, whose wife Mary was on trial that very day. Next was Harry as Albert Runcorn, a stocky, cruel-looking man. Sirius brought up the rear, scowling heavily as Frederick Travers. Travers’ younger brother had been in the same batch as Regulus, but he’d been a prat of the highest order. Sirius could still remember when Travers had tried to sabotage Regulus’ Quidditch trials. This had been during Regulus’ second year, when he and Sirius were still on speaking terms, and so Sirius had heard all about it, though Regulus had forbidden him from taking revenge. It was nearly twenty years later, and Regulus was dead, yet Sirius still felt a strange sort of pleasure in using Travers’ name to muscle himself to the front of the line.

Inside, he nearly stopped dead in his tracks as he surveyed the changed Ministry of Magic. Orion had taken Sirius with him quite often during his childhood to parade him around to the other Lords of the peerage, like the Malfoys or the Parkinsons, sneering, supercilious older men with ornate offices and a creeping air of menace. Sirius had always been a little awed by these wizards, even as he decided at an early age never to emulate them. They exuded dark, icy power, and their smiles never reached their eyes, and they always seemed to size up Sirius as if he were a piece of meat up for an equinox sacrifice.

(Orion had hated them too—but Orion was more practical than Sirius, and he knew perfectly well that as Lord Black, he needed to carefully cultivate his relationship with these men. Not to mention, Orion had learned alongside these wizards, been with them in Slytherin House, witnessed their triumphs at Quidditch and their difficulties securing a date to the Christmas ball, seen their fathers snap at them for wilted postures or the frayed ends of their robes. They did not frighten him, and in a strange way he loved them even as he hated them, if only for their familiarity, and their lifelong proximity to him. He had tried to do the same for his son, but Sirius even prior to his shocking Sorting at Hogwarts had never been able to muzzle himself long enough to befriend their children.)

Sirius had hated those men without reserve, but despite himself, he had liked the Ministry. He had liked the grandeur of the lobby and the gleaming tile, the large statue in the centre, the hundreds of paper birds whisking briskly through the air. He had liked the dizzying drop of the elevators and the light-filled cafeteria, where his father would leave him with a few Galleons while he conducted his more…secretive business. Most of all, Sirius had liked the constant, friendly bustle, witches and wizards with robes of every colour, the purposeful direction of their movements and the sense that an elaborate web was being spun in front of his eyes. Sirius had enjoyed the Auror Academy, too. He had liked training alongside a class of his peers, he had liked excelling at the challenges, and he had liked the jocular camaraderie

that had sprung up nearly instantly, aided by James' and Sirius' years of popularity at Hogwarts. It had saddened him to leave when the war broke out without completing the final set of examinations which would have properly inducted him to the force.

The dark, bottomless tiles that now shone under his feet; the surly guards at each corner; the glistening silver accents and gaudy banners that proclaimed *Magic is Might;* and the scared, furtive silence that echoed so loudly in the sparsely populated lobby—

"Blimey," Ron whispered, perhaps arriving at the same conclusion. He and Sirius shared a mutual look of horror before they both came simultaneously to their senses, stepping away from each other and regarding each opposite wall thoughtfully. Sirius felt a prick of unease drip wetly into the collar of his robes. It would be difficult to escape the Ministry. He felt the wards as a heavy, oppressive presence on his skin. They would not be able to Apparate; they would have to use the Floo, and each entrance was closely guarded.

Two hours, or rather, an hour and forty-two minutes remaining. They did not have time to waste.

It took a further seventeen minutes for Sirius and Harry to make their way down to the trial room, as scheduled. Ron was waylaid, perhaps by the unexpected sight of his father or the unpleasant sight of Yaxley—a bloody supercilious tosser, he had been at Hogwarts with Sirius, and Sirius had always hated him—but Hermione attached herself to Umbridge with quick, sure steps, though she was in a way at the greatest risk of all of them.

Harry and Sirius wandered down, engaged in a discussion about the most efficient way to ferry Mudbloods to Azkaban. Runcorn and Travers could plausibly be seen together, given Runcorn was one of the wizards in the Muggle-born Registration Committee, and they had previously collaborated during their shared tenure in the Creatures Registration Division. Harry had initially protested that they be seen together, but Sirius had insisted. He was not going to let Harry out of his sight, and he knew enough of the players of the Ministry to choose two to impersonate who could walk together to the basement, even if his gossip was fifteen years out of date.

Standing outside the door, Harry and Sirius' eyes sought each other. It was difficult to say who was seeking the greater assurance, or who was seeking to provide it. Sirius felt suspended in a frozen moment, his stomach churning with regret and guilt. Harry ought not to be here at all. There was absolutely no excuse for Sirius to have involved Harry with this scheme—

— "Bloody hell," said Ron, clearly out of breath, having sprinted down the stairs to join them before they entered. "I think I tipped my father off to something. He looked at me very suspiciously. Looks bloody miserable, too. I think he's ill. Dunno why he bothers showing up to work, or what he's even doing, given I doubt this lot cares very much about the misuse of Muggle artefacts."

The moment broken, Sirius looked away from Harry. There was nothing to be gained in miring himself in regret. They were all here now, and the locket was on the other side of the door. Sirius could feel it, somehow, a lurking, oily presence, an unfamiliar well of magic that screamed silently into the air. His mouth was dry, and his hand grasped the doorknob without

bothering to check for a ward. He recognised the locket. He had felt its magic for an entire year, an underlayer of malice beneath the rest of the hatred of the house, and it had lurked silently beneath him as he slept.

“Sirius,” said Harry, urgently, and Sirius’ hand tightened on the doorknob. He recognised it, and in a strange way, he felt it must recognise him too.

He opened the door. They three strode in, Ron first, making a beeline for his alleged wife as they'd planned.

"What is the meaning of this?" Umbridge snapped angrily. "Get out of here. These trials are private."

Sirius smiled coldly, his eyes flicking around the detail of the room. The trial room had the high, vaulted ceilings preferred by many of the subterranean rooms of the Ministry, an attempt, perhaps, to give the illusion that they were not underground. There were rows of seats as if inviting an audience to a play, though all were empty, occupied only by Ron’s traitor brother, Hermione, Yaxley, and an extra guard. On the ceiling, swooping and diving like black fish at the bottom of the sea were three Dementors. In the back of Sirius’ mind, his brother screamed for help, and Sirius looked on impassively. It was nothing he had not heard before.

"Reg," cried Mrs. Cattermole, as Ron pulled out his wand, standing between her and Umbridge. Yaxley evaluated them and then stood slowly, looking bored. He twirled his wand theatrically between his fingers and Sirius curled his lip in disdain. Yaxley had always been a shallow wizard, more prone to flashy shows of power than any real strength. Sirius could best him in a duel if needed, he was sure of it.

"Gentlemen," Yaxley said in his reedy, snide voice. "I would hate to resort to punitive action."

Sirius gave Yaxley a disgusted, dismissive look and then raised his chin to look Umbridge in the eye. She had begun to make her way down the stairs toward him, moving her toad-like body awkwardly through the narrow stairs. The locket gleamed around her neck, and Sirius’ eyes were caught by it. It was large and ornate and the silver S seemed branded in the centre. Sirius bared his teeth at it; his throat convulsed. "*Madam* Umbridge has something of mine."

Umbridge’s hand went to her own throat, and her fat fingers clenched over the locket. Sirius could not look away from it. Had Regulus been wearing it, when he died? Had Kreacher lifted it off his dead master’s neck, or had Regulus had the presence of mind to thrust it away, a doomed attempt to save himself, or to conceal the locket forever? Sirius tried to recall his dream, but his mind was full of all his other dreams, and he felt cloudy and untethered. He noticed vaguely that Ron’s brother had stood too, though his grip on his wand was looser, and his stance significantly less aggressive. Sirius instinctively turned away from him, his body understanding Percy was not a threat.

The Dementors swooped lower, and Sirius faltered. Now it was not Regulus that he was hearing, but James—James with his lilting, playful voice, the snap of mischievousness at the end of his proper schoolboy tone. James begging for his life. James shutting the door in

Sirius' face when Sirius had called James *selfish* for refusing to take Lily and Harry into the care of Potter Manor. James looking at him in suspicion, refusing to name Sirius as his Secret Keeper. James trusting Peter over Sirius. James dying for Sirius' failures.

Harry, poor Harry, tiny Harry, Harry who had been placed in Sirius' arms merely hours after his birth…Sirius had failed him already, like he had failed everyone else, and Harry would die because of it…

Mine, whispered the locket, and Sirius shook off James' whispers and lunged at it. The moment his fingers made contact with the locket, he gasped audibly, and the hum in the back of his mind crystalised into a panicked scream. The locket was afraid of him, and Sirius suddenly realised that the house was afraid too. These bastions of old magic, these corruptions of wizard-power, these founts of dirty elemental power…they were *afraid* of him, of his power, of his Black blood and his knowledge. The house sought to shackle him, not to strengthen him, because it knew that it could not compete with his magic unleashed. They were afraid of him, but he was not afraid of them.

The Dementor was nearly to Sirius. Perhaps it recognised him from his years in Azkaban; Sirius certainly felt that he recognised *it*. Sirius had wrenched the locket off of Umbridge's neck, and he brandished it defiantly at the Dementor, even as his knees began to buckle, and James' voice turned into Remus'. Sirius had never liked Remus as much as he liked James; that was his guilty secret, something he had never told Remus, not in all the years they had relied on each other in the background. James had shone fiercely in the light, and Sirius had gravitated toward him. Remus was too similar to him: grimy, damaged, Dark. Sometimes when they sat together in Grimmauld Place and silently took tea, Sirius had the unfaithful thought that James would know the correct thing to stay to lift Sirius from his sadness. James would have been able to free Sirius from Azkaban with his wealth and charm; James would have spirited Sirius away from Grimmauld the first chance he got. He would have installed Sirius in his childhood bedroom in Potter Manor…he would have given him a broom and let him fly for hours around the Quidditch pitch, to banish the ghosts that lingered like smoke in his mind…he would have allowed Sirius to avoid the thoughts that crowded at the front of his mind and screamed to be heard. Remus never did any of those things. (His unquestioned presence, warm and solid by Sirius' side. James would never have been able to sit still for so long).

Sirius became suddenly aware that he was on his knees, and Harry was standing over him. He frowned and blinked up at Harry, confused. Harry had stood over him like this before. Perhaps he was still standing over Sirius, and Sirius had briefly fallen asleep and dreamed up the last three years, a Dementor-induced dream…perhaps Albus was still alive…

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry roared, as he had in his third year, and Ron pulled Sirius to his feet, shouldering him with one arm. Sirius had led them in here confidently, decided who they would impersonate and located a map of the Ministry in the Black family library, but he was clearly in no condition to lead them out.

Ron felt a sharp pain when he muscled Sirius out of the door and the locket swung and branded him. He hissed but did not slow; they had all just taken their extra dose of Polyjuice, but he knew they did not have very much time. Percy had dismissed the guards, which was

something that Ron was going to think about, later, if they managed to escape the Ministry, and he and Harry had managed to subdue the slimy looking man. Well, Ron had primarily; he felt a buzz of embarrassed pride when he thought about the blow he'd landed on the man when Harry had leapt at his legs to hold him down. For all of their duelling practice, they had acted like brawling Muggles, but Ron couldn't say he regretted it.

He'd told Mary Cattermole to get her children and leave him a secret note in their bedroom to instruct him where to follow. Ron wanted to go back to the alley and revive the man, but Hermione had shaken her head sadly at him. Reg Cattermole would be awakening soon of his own accord, and Ron could only hope that he opted to return home, rather than going to work.

"We'll need to go to a Floo," Hermione muttered quietly as they drew to the top of the stairs. "It won't be easy. Perhaps you can say you're taking him home—Travers, I mean."

"There's no point using a Floo if we can't get in anywhere," Ron hissed. "Sirius was supposed to open the Floo to Grimmauld by lifting the wards. He doesn't exactly seem like he's going to be capable of doing that."

They paused and stared at Sirius, whose eyes were glassy and staring. One hand clutched the locket, and the other flexed by his side, as if in pain.

"What's happened to him?" Ron asked hesitantly. "Is it the locket?"

Harry bit his lip as he looked at his godfather. He began to reach out with a trembling hand for the locket, but Hermione slapped at it. "Don't *touch* it."

"Kreacher didn't say it was dangerous to touch," Harry argued obstinately. Ron grunted as he felt Sirius began to slide heavily toward the ground. Below them, he could hear the sound of Percy's voice, tired but still imperious. Bloody poncy git. Merlin, it had been good to see his father and his brother. They both looked so tired, but they were *alive*, and they were doing something normal, even if going to work no longer was anything remotely normal. Ron had wanted to break down in front of both and beg for help.

"We have to go, now." Even if Percy weren't—*truly* a Death Eater, he was still in league with them, and Ron didn't want to find out where exactly Percy's loyalties lay in company with Harry and Sirius and Hermione, all dangerous companions in their own ways.

"Kreacher," said Harry again, but his eyes were bright, even as Runcorn. "Kreacher can come and get us, can't he? Kreacher! Kreacher, I command you to come—Master Sirius commands you to come—"

With a pop, Kreacher appeared, and all three teenagers nearly sagged with relief.

"I should have thought of that," groaned Hermione as the elf took in the situation, the gleam of the locket reflected in his dark, bottomless eyes. "We could have saved ourselves so much trouble. I wouldn't have had to brew that *bloody* Polyjuice. Merlin's beard, *I'm* supposed to be the smart one."

Ron, despite himself, caught Harry's eyes, and by the time Kreacher whisked them away, all three of them were giggling too hard to breathe.

***

Sirius dreamt.

His right hand was curled possessively around the locket, for none of them had been able to pry it from his grasp. He had dropped to sleep within minutes of their return, and he lay swaddled in the heavy silk bedsheets of his childhood, a steaming cup of tea by his side, and a trio of candles lit on his desk across the room.

Sirius dreamt, and the house catalogued him anxiously, noticing that his life force was marginally diminished from the Polyjuice, and his muscles were tired from the exertion. He had a bruise on his thigh from when he'd thrown himself at Umbridge, and he'd banged his elbow painfully on the floor. His magic had flared defiantly as the Dementors had drawn close to him, but it was tired now, and it pooled on the floor beneath him.

Back, back, back, sang the house, and the shutters in the master bedroom opened and closed in relief. The desk in the study relaxed, and with a groan of wood, the drawers unfused themselves from each other and once again could be opened by a wizard with the right spell. The chittering in the wall stalled, as the creatures were lulled into complacent silence by the knowledge that the wizard had returned and his magic was once again available for their use. Quietly, Sirius' injuries healed themselves as the house released some of its magic for its heir to use.

The house did not hate Sirius, of course. He believed so because his father had, and Cygnus Black before him. The Black family needed to have an heir; yet the curse was not precisely a curse. Lycoris Black had anchored his magic to a small gleaming gem which he embedded inside the wardstone that had been dutifully carried to each new residence for hundreds of years. It was not a Horcrux, for it did not keep him alive, nor was it the type of magic that Nicholas Flamel ripped from his unborn son and crystalized within the ragged edges of the Philosopher's Stone. As long as there had been witches and wizards, there had been ways to skirt the edges of magic, to pull into the world magic which ought not to exist, and Lycoris had been driven by his own fear and greed and petty impulse, as all wizards were, at one time or another.

It had been in the in-between time, when wizards had no name for physical magic and spoke of souls only in the vaguest of terms. It was before each wizard was limited to a wand but after the wild, fey time of magic, when power gathered freely in upturned palms and flowed like water through the world. It was difficult to say with any sort of certainty whether the gradual move to wand-magic had been the correct course of history, and with any such transition, it was not apparent anything was changing at all except in hindsight. Sirius had barely learned of such a time, and Flamel was loath to speak of it, so as not to remind anyone

that there had been other options for how they could have developed to use magic, as a people.

Lycoris had knelt in the ground and smeared his brow with blood and traced runes on the soft inner flesh of his wrist and done the rest of the ritual acts, acts which even to today's Dark wizards would have seemed impossibly rudimentary and pagan. He had slaughtered an animal for sacrifice and melted pure gold in a small cauldron and whispered chants in an even, steady tone, but at the end of it all, he had asked only for one thing: ***protect my family***.

And the magic that he awoke from the grounds, which thrummed in the crashing rivers and sparked at the edges of branches and raged powerfully in the winds, listened to him.

A give and a take.

Awareness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 6: Awareness

October 1997 // two months remaining

They could not destroy the locket.

It had taken them very little time to ascertain that the locket must be opened by Parseltongue, and little time further to realise that the ghostly figures that emerged from the locket's vile centre were designed to play on one's insecurities, test one's mettle, twist one's mind so that one emerged in a jealous, vengeful rage. They all took their turn at facing the locket with the sort of Gryffindor forthrightness which prevented any from refusing to expose themselves in front of the rest: Ron against a glacial, beautiful Hermione with flashing gemstone eyes and a scornful laugh; Harry staring at his mother, who raised an eyebrow and told Harry coolly that he was a disappointment to her; Hermione confronting Professor McGonagall, who held out her ghostly hand for Hermione's wand; and Sirius, who saw Regulus.

Regulus, Regulus, Regulus. Sirius was sick of seeing the ghost of his brother. He had forged through his confused feelings and arrived at the other side of guilt; he had not protected his brother, but he had tried, and Regulus had not heeded his advice. Regulus had abandoned *him* as much as he'd been abandoned, and Sirius was tired of feeling guilty. The locket was plainly unsophisticated magic if the best it could do was drag up *Regulus* from the depths of his damaged psyche.

Destroyed beyond magical repair. That had been what the book told Hermione. They three had looked at Sirius expectantly, and he had scowled. He did not know how to destroy something permanently, at least, not without study, and that they assumed otherwise rankled him.

They had every right to assume, of course. Sirius did know *one* way to destroy something beyond all repair. He had once hidden himself in the panels of the room, as he often did, curious to see what his uncles were doing in their secret workshop, and he had seen something destroyed far beyond hope. He had seen a great number of terrible things—frogs with their emerald chests split open, and wriggling worms erupting out of a rancid orange stew, and vials of deep murky blood bubbling over long-stemmed candles—yet something drove him to continually return to his perch whenever he heard their matching tread on the stairs, nearly in unison, two steps apart.

He had seen them coax *it* out of the gleaming gem, and he had seen *it* hover in front of Uncle Castor. *It* was a dark, shining cloud, a heavy mist with squirming, dripping tendrils, like the illustrations in his *Dark Arts* book. *It* looked like that because the magic had plucked the idea out of one of their minds, or perhaps all of their minds. They had all read the same books, had

the same nightmares. They'd all been raised in the same house. When they thought of a monster they did not think of something with legs or claws or great terrible teeth; they thought of something small, something sneaky, something that could curl out from under their beds in the middle of the night, linger menacingly over their chests, creep insidiously into their open mouths. They all thought that the most dangerous curse was something that could not be seen, could not be blamed. Something that existed only when one had his eyes closed, yet something that was malicious even when it was hiding in the dark.

Sirius had seen *it* enter his uncle, and he had seen Uncle Pollux make the terrible choice to destroy the power they had coaxed from the world. It had taken Castor's soul and the guilt took Pollux's life only months later. Both uncles had died in the same room, both by Pollux's hand.

Was it the house's curse, dug up from the depths? Had they managed to find *it* and failed to destroy it? They had become obsessed with Horcruxes, with the desire to bind themselves to immortality. Perhaps the gem was Castor's soul, and the spell that Pollux had used was what Sirius now needed to do to destroy the locket…perhaps he could destroy the locket, but it would require his life, or his soul in return…

Standing in front of the three teenagers now, Sirius hesitated. Perhaps there was a curse, and his fears were founded. Perhaps it was sinking into each of them, perhaps they were all breathing it in. Perhaps it would drive him to kill them all for their own protection.

Sirius looked down. He was clutching the locket tightly. With effort, he uncurled his fingers, so that the locket lay loosely in his palm.

He had a real enemy, of course. Whatever had destroyed his uncles was magic of their own creation. They had meddled in magics that no wizard had any right to meddle in. So had the Dark Lord. Sirius had always wondered if his father had hated Lord Voldemort as he'd hated his own brothers for having the misguided courage to delve into depths better left unexplored. It was arrogance, and it would kill them all.

"I will study it," Sirius said abruptly, and from the way they all three shared a flinch, he guessed they had been waiting for him to respond for quite some time.

Harry exchanged an uneasy look with his friends. "We think—we think the locket should remain here. With Kreacher, or locked away."

"So we may come downstairs and discover it stolen anew?" Sirius inquired archly, raising an eyebrow. "Harry, my brother *died* for this. I won't leave it out of my sight."

"It's just…what if it affects you?" Hermione burst out, taking a half-step forward.

Sirius frowned at her. He quite liked Hermione; he had enjoyed having her as his exploration partner, and he thought she was competent and reasonable. Yet her insistence on being right was almost—insulting to someone of his position. "Hermione," he said, and he didn't quite catch the blink she gave at the pitying tone of his voice. "I've been dealing with Dark magic since I was a child. This house is steeped with it. The locket was here for months and it didn't affect me. I'm not going to *wear* it. I'm just not going to let it out of my sight."

"It can affect you," Ron said darkly. Something inside Sirius stirred at the look that echoed between him and Harry. "Even just sitting around *without you wearing it.* It can still affect you."

Harry pursed his lips but did not speak up. Ron turned away from Harry and looked expectantly back at Sirius. Harry claimed he had only written a handful of times in the diary, but Ron had begun to feel a sharp edge of impatience to Harry that was…different than his normal caged-bird feeling. There was an intensity of some kind, a bite to his words, that Ron was unfamiliar with and mistrusted deeply. That Harry had made him swear he wouldn't tell Hermione he was writing in the diary only unsettled Ron further, but Harry had pointed out slyly that the only one in the house that Tom would be more interested in possessing than Harry would be Hermione, and so Ron had reluctantly agreed to keep quiet.

Sirius' face tightened in irritation before he exhaled noisily. "It probably will," he said to their joint surprise. Ron felt himself relaxing as a grim smile crossed over Sirius' lips. There was the man that he had gotten to know over the past months, the man who teased Harry and allowed Hermione access to his library and gave Ron hypothetical scenarios from his Auror days for him to work through during the long stifling afternoons. "And that's why you three are here, to keep me honest. But I'm not going to let it out of my sight, and that's final. Remember that we need to find the others. I will handle researching how to destroy this one; the three of you must work out with the others are, or figure out how to get more clues."

Hermione nodded solemnly. She caught the look that Sirius gave her and understood that to mean he was entrusting *her* with this task. Sirius had done more than open the doors of the library and allow her full reign; he had keyed her into the wards as best as he was able so that the indexing charms would listen to her commands, and he'd explained to her how to sense malicious intent out of the books, and he'd shown her the Darkest section where she'd eventually found the book that they were referencing now to destroy a Horcrux. Ron had a—surprisingly sharp mind, and more than once over the past few weeks, Hermione had been privately caught at the way that Ron could tangle with the wild situations Sirius lobbed at him, but she knew he lacked the endurance and the seemingly wild leaps of inference that enabled her to take charge of the dizzying library and discern its secrets. Harry was—Harry. He was burdened enough. Hermione would not rely on him either.

Something of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. That had become her unabiding obsession, and she used her access to the library well. Within the first two weeks, Hermione had managed to construct a fairly accurate family tree for both the Gryffindors and the Ravenclaw, and she'd even noted the link to the Peverells and therefore the Potters. (Harry had been quiet when she'd informed him of his heritage. *Just another way I am him and not him*, he had said, bizarrely, and then walked away quickly).

She had researched their family's artefacts too. The problem was, of course, that there were so many—and that there was no way of confirming who owned what now. Hermione's best guess was that one would be at Hogwarts, but if the byzantine path to the Chamber of Secrets was anything to go by, it would be impossible to find without the knowledge of where it was, the challenge of Snape notwithstanding.

It was easy to feel hopeless. Ron succumbed to it, listening desperately to Potterwatch each day, watching with dark eyes as Hermione fussed over Harry. She too had noticed his moods but without knowledge of the diary, she had concluded it was merely Dumbledore's death that was causing Harry to act out. Ron felt hopeless whenever he added the morning's *Prophet* to his carefully curated collection, constructed in case they ever needed to reference an earlier article. He felt hopeless each time the stack grew, a visible indication of how swiftly time was passing. It was already October, and they had two Horcruxes, but they could not destroy either, for various reasons. They also could not leave. Ron had not missed the covetous way that Sirius stared at Harry. Sirius would not let Harry out of his sight, and by one metric Ron quite agreed. By another, he felt desperately like they ought to be out there *doing* something. Percy had been in the newspaper announcing that the trials had been ceased, and all those suspected of being a Muggleborn would be detained until future notice. *Detained, but alive*, something had whispered to Ron, who searched for malice in the small moving photograph of his brother but could find only reserved determination. Fred and George were risking their lives with *Potterwatch*, and Charlie, from the sounds of it, had taken over some escape route, flying through the skies. What was Ron doing, locked away in a great big dreary house? (The house was warm, it was comfortable, it was safe—but it stifled him, and something in his chest gasped for air in the indolent lazy heat of the afternoon).

Hermione felt hopeless too. Her parents, of course. Harry. Ron. Ginny and their classmates fighting with Death Eaters in the castle. The uncertainty—had Hermione been wrong to trust Dumbledore? Had Dumbledore been wrong to trust Snape? Was Hermione up for this task? They were relying on her, on her brain, and yet she could not sleep, and she woke with headaches, and her brain felt slow and laborious to push into motion, yet her anxiety fluttered about her like a bird with a broken wing, and her magic caused the windows to crystallise over with the sharp chill of her concern.

Yet her mind wasn't stagnant. Thirteen days after they returned triumphantly with the locket, Hermione made a startling discovery.

"What is it?" Harry asked, leaning over the book. Hermione eyed him but decided that his tone was more curious than snappish.

"It's the Ravenclaw Common Room."

Harry looked up and gave her a wry smile. It was such a *Harry* smile that Hermione's stomach gave a great leap in relief—something that was not entirely unnoticed by Ron, though entirely misconstrued. “Yes, Hermione,” Harry said patiently. “I can see that. If you’re feeling particularly homesick, I can lend you the Marauder's Map.”

Hermione winced as Harry’s smile dimmed; yesterday, Harry had tried to show Sirius the Map, only for Sirius to spot Snape’s name and descend into a raging anger. “Look,” she said quickly, pointing to the photographed statue. “According to this, the statue is in the likeness of Helena Ravenclaw, Lady Ravenclaw’s daughter.”

Ron came around the table and peered at the book over Harry’s scruffy head. Hermione noted absently that both needed to cut their hair. She would ask Sirius, given her hair grooming charms were not particularly notable, but she wasn’t sure if she trusted Sirius with such a spell these days. (Bare necks, bent over in supplication, like the old stone statues she had

once seen in France. She might be overreacting, but she also might—not be). “She had a daughter?”

“Well, presumably,” Harry said before Hermione could reply. “They all had *heirs*.”

Hermione smiled with Ron at the haughty, affected tone that Harry took on, though Hermione’s smile was tinged with worry. Perhaps she oughtn’t have told Harry that he was the descendent of Godric Gryffindor. He had quite enough to burden him without feeling that he had a heritage to uphold as well. “Well, look at what she’s wearing. It looks like it could be the fabled diadem of wisdom, the one that we read about in the other book.”

Ron grabbed the book away from Harry and examined it closely. He had found the book of artefacts more interesting than Hermione would have thought. She was carefully not considering whether his fascination with other people’s family artefacts was due to the presumable lack of Weasley artefacts. Hermione’s family did not have *artefacts*, but they still had *something*: her grandmother’s ring, for instance, or her father’s old typewriter. Ron’s family didn’t seem to have anything that would speak to their existence after they all died. “Good eye,” he said thoughtfully. “It does look like it. But all that would do is confirm that the diadem exists. We still don’t know where it would be now.”

“Hogwarts,” said Harry and Hermione in unison. They looked at each other and both began to explain, their words tumbling over each other.

“Helena Ravenclaw was said to have died in the castle—”

“—Tom would have been in the Ravenclaw Common Room, there’s no chance he wouldn’t have—”

“—and her mother died of grief soon after, so we could anticipate her mother would have—”

“—and he would have recognised the diadem. We know he was researching the artefacts—”

“—and Rowena Ravenclaw certainly had the capacity to conceal something so precious in the castle—”

They stopped and looked at each other, both temporarily stymied by what Ron had asked earlier, though on a much smaller scale. Even if the diadem *were* in Hogwarts, where would it be?

“It doesn’t matter,” Ron said, and Hermione frowned at him, not understanding the scowl that had crossed his face as she and Harry spoke. He tossed the book back to the table, where it landed with a heavy thump. “We can’t go to Hogwarts anyway.”

But Harry’s attention was caught by the idea. He crept up to the library after bedtime had officially passed. He'd waited, but there were no cups of tea forthcoming, and Sirius' bedroom seemed dark and silent.

The stairs creaked loudly beneath his socked feet. Harry stopped and cringed; he was used to sneaking around silently, but he could not seem to devise the correct strategy here. He had

cast a silencing charm on his feet, which had worked previously for him to pad lightly to Regulus' room.

Harry cast an anxious look to Sirius' door. It seemed all the more silent, and all the more dark.

Up, up, up. The library was nearly to the top of the house, and Harry had not risked entering it alone prior to this. But looking at the sorrowful stone face of Helena Ravenclaw, he had known almost instinctively that the twisted circlet around her head must be the Horcrux. Of course there was one in Hogwarts. Tom would have put a Horcrux in Hogwarts, and what better one that the symbol of wisdom?

The library was colder than the rest of the house, and Harry shivered and pulled the Invisibility Cloak closer around him. Reaching a hand out of his cloak to grab the lantern hanging from its rusty hook, he remembered his first year and his dreadful nighttime trip to the Restricted Section. He would trade anything to be in Hogwarts now, even if he did have to hide from Snape. Grimmauld Place had never been a particularly pleasant place for him, but it had begun to feel almost alien in these last few weeks. Sirius—well, Sirius no longer seemed to care quite as much about Harry as he did before, which Harry should have expected to happen. He was James' son, but Regulus was Sirius' brother, and he'd been a hero at the very end. He'd *died* to defeat Voldemort, where all Harry had done was to live.

The library was colder, Harry soon found, because the large paned windows in the back were open, and outside the wind whipped up a frenzied moan from the large oak tree that trailed its branches into Harry's window, three floors below. Harry leaned out the window to catch at the handle, and he saw to his surprise a glimmering light from his room. Or perhaps it was Ron's—he couldn't quite tell. *Ron* had been odd, too, quieter than Harry would have thought, and in a way, strangely sullen. Of course, Ron's whole family was in danger because Harry had put them there, so Harry supposed he couldn't blame him.

"You should have told me what to do," Harry said quietly, releasing the words out into the winds. The tree leaned toward him, as if it were listening. "You shouldn't have left me here with nothing."

Sirius had received a copy of Rita Skeeter's book. Harry did not know who had sent it to him, or why Kreacher had allowed it inside. Sirius had hidden it in his room away from Harry, but Harry had found it one day and read through it in snippets while Ron and Sirius played at Aurors below. Sirius had locked the door, but the door had creaked open hopefully at Harry's tentative touch, and he'd stepped inside quietly, oddly thankful that Sirius and Ron were too wrapped up in their hypothetical scenarios and mock duels to notice his absence.

"Maybe she's right, and you were a Dark wizard," Harry continued now, releasing his words into the empty expanse of night. He paused, awkward and anxiously, anticipating tears, but they didn't come. The rug strained and flexed beneath his feet as the house listened curiously. "Maybe you killed your sister. Maybe you never wanted to help me at all."

He waited expectantly, but the tree did nothing save drag its spindly fingers against the side of the house. Harry sighed dispiritedly and reached for the handle to swing the window shut, but he gasped a second later. The twisted brass handle was cold, so cold that his fingers

recoiled from it automatically. A second later he found himself on the ground, and he scrambled to press his back against the large column behind, his wand brandished over his bent knees.

"Who's there?"

Nobody was there—but Harry shivered nevertheless. He was alone, he realised, and the weight of the realization dropped into his stomach and kept him anchored at the floor. He was so utterly alone. Ron must hate him for what he'd done to his family, and Hermione too. And Dumbledore—

A young girl's cry and a ghost of laughter. Harry clenched his teeth and thrust his wand out obstinately, but there was nothing but the rustling of dust on the floor, and the crumpled rug underfoot.

"***Stop, Albus—"***

He was alone, but he could *hear* the girl, he could, as if she were next to him. He could hear her so vividly that he cried out for the invisible Albus to stop. *The locket*, he thought wildly, but the locket must be with Sirius. The diary was inside his pocket, but it too was cold and inert. He withdrew his hand and clutched instead at the rug and it wrapped itself around his hand soothingly, so that he may see what was out there, in the dangerous world that lay just outside the window, that he may confront his truth and realise the danger he posed to the rest of them. The wind moaned in response, and the great oak tree quaked, so that Harry felt certain he could hear the sound of Albus Dumbledore crying out in pain as his sister died in a flash of impetuous anger.

He was a killer—Dumbledore was a killer, as he'd asked Harry to become too—he had recognised a darkness inside Harry (Quirrell, dead at his hands, and Voldemort risen by the power of his blood, and Bellatrix Lestrange shrieking under his *Cruciatus*, and the sinuous turn of Nagini's body glimpsed through his eyes, and the dark oily slick of Voldemort's mind layered over his) as he had seen the darkness inside Tom before, and perhaps inside his own mind—

The wind died down. Harry sat shaking beneath the window, his back pressed firmly against the wall. With damp, cold fingers, he scrabbled for the diary in his pocket and summoned a quill from the pot of self-inking quills that Hermione had installed on the nearby table. His hand was shaking. Rage, perhaps, or fear. Dumbledore and his kindly looks weighed against the murder he'd performed as a boy. Dumbledore the general, in conflict with Dumbledore the Headmaster, both so interested in Harry, both with those penetrating blue eyes. Best friends with the Dark wizard Grindelwald. ***You are like him, but he is not like you.***

Perhaps Dumbledore had not meant it as a compliment. Perhaps Harry should be gladdened he did not have Dumbledore's esteem—or ashamed that at times he thought he had Dumbledore's love.

Tom, I know one of the Horcruxes.

There are not other Horcruxes.

There are, there are five others. Harry paused and blinked away an angry tear. Dumbledore had told him not to write to Tom unless he was desperate, but perhaps Dumbledore had been wrong. *I'm going to destroy them all.*

You won't be able to touch any of them, if there are indeed multiple. The sight of Tom's smooth, calligraphic handwriting made Harry want to throw the diary clear across the room. So smug, so self assured, so ready with a clever response. How Harry hated him. He was nothing like Harry at all, and Harry would never be at risk of believing otherwise.

I'm the heir of Gryffindor, he wrote recklessly. Had Dumbledore known that? Sirius had told him that James had settled their family in Godric's Hollow, rather than use the house he'd grown up in. Perhaps Harry's father had known of the protection in his blood. Perhaps he'd known the land would protect Harry. *Still think I wouldn't be able to touch them?*

You are a child, nothing more.

So are you. You're just the memory of a child. I'm older than you, Tom, and I've got a body and my magic and my friends. You've got nothing. You're worse off than even Grindelwald.

You dare speak to me that way.

I feel sorry for you, Harry wrote savagely, sensing instinctively that nothing would rankle Tom more. *I pity you. You wanted to rule the world and you ended up with nothing. Even Dumbledore was a greater wizard than you ever will be.*

I am the greatest wizard that ever lived, Tom insisted angrily, and Harry laughed, unaware that the rug had crept away quietly from his fevered surge of anger. The house recognised this anger, and it did not want it inside its doors. So Dumbledore might have abandoned him; so his friends may leave him too. Harry was still there, and he wasn't going to be frightened by a book, by any of the books in this bloody library.

And he wasn't going to be frightened by a locket, either. It was a big ugly piece of jewellery, nothing more. Harry was prophesied to kill the Dark Lord—it should be within his power to destroy each rotten bit of his soul.

Another boy would have tried to wheedle information out of Tom, or understood from him how to destroy the Horcruxes. Percy had tried, and it had launched him into a storm of his own creation. Dumbledore had tried too, in his own way, apologising with genuine sincerity to a young angry child that he had failed.

Harry did not. Each night thereafter, he poured out his anger to Tom, writing him tales of success gleaned from *Potterwatch*, sharing with him the story of his other self's past defeats. Harry hated Tom, hated him with a passion, and he felt a wild, savage urge to tear him down, to make him feel fear, to prove to him indelibly that he had failed.

(And if Percy saw Tom far more often in his soul than before, he did not fully understand why, though perhaps some of him suspected that Harry's strategy, though unknown to him, was working.)

***

The locket had to be worn. Sirius knew that the others in the house disagreed; they believed that since Harry's hissed Parseltongue was sufficient to open the centre clasp and produce the noxious grey mist that so tormented the teenagers, nothing else was required. Sirius had seen the mist twist into Regulus, James, Remus, and even Peter, and he could tell that it was nothing more than a glorified Boggart, meant to play on the insecurities of whomever was closest.

They were holding *Salazar Slytherin's locket*. As much as Sirius disdained the pureblood community's breathless adulation of the Founders and their bloodlines, he also knew that such an old and powerful artefact would have far more dangerous magic than merely producing a frightening ghost. That Harry had the power to open it certainly was important, but it was not sufficient, and Sirius struggled to explain to the others why he felt so strongly that they could not merely toss the thing in a drawer and keep it locked up.

When Sirius wore the locket, he felt its magic: a creeping, insidious sort of magic, like cold, sharp tendrils spreading over his chest. He was not sure if the others could sense it; certainly Harry had frowned at him, when Sirius had tried to describe the feeling. They thought it meant he was more susceptible to its powers, rather than more *aware*. (Aware, awake. Alive.)

These types of objects were enchanted based on their form. The ring that had so ensnared Albus had only activated when it was worn on his finger; the diary that had entrapped Ron's sister had to be written in, constantly; Hufflepuff's Cup, if they were ever to find it, certainly would need to be filled and drunk from; and Ravenclaw's Diadem, which had sent the three teenagers into a flurry of whispered planning, would need to be worn upon one's head, if they ever managed to break into Hogwarts and get it. Using these objects in the proper way imbued them with magic, which *was* dangerous—Sirius was not disputing that fact. Yet he also knew that magical objects were at their most vulnerable when they were active. They were enchanted to sit unnoticed for hundreds of years, to survive rebellions and fires and floods and irresponsible young wizards. The old families' greatest strength was not due to their Gringotts vault, nor the portraits upon their walls, nor the knowledge within their libraries. No, their great strength was their ability to *endure,* to outlast, to produce enough capable heirs to weather the storms of their time, to reproduce at the proper time, and to protect enough of the family from harm. Sirius' mother had made that quite clear to both he and Regulus.

As long as the locket was expending all of its energy in protecting itself, it would never expose its vulnerable areas. As long as Harry and the rest exhausted themselves arguing fruitlessly with ghosts, they would never muster the requisite strength to discover and defeat these vulnerabilities.

But Albus had asked *Sirius* for his help. He had asked Sirius because he had known that Sirius would have this strength. He had told Harry of the Horcruxes, as was his right—but he had asked *Sirius* explicitly to have them destroyed. He had merely told Harry to find them.

("That's rubbish," Harry said hotly when Sirius shared this view.

“It’s just strategy,” Sirius had said wearily. It seemed sometimes like James receded further and further from him, at least when Sirius looked up and caught a glimpse of Lily’s sharp eyes. He did not understand Harry, not as much as he’d thought he did, and it angered him, though he was too ashamed to admit it. “You three haven’t even graduated from Hogwarts. You need to find the others; you won’t be able to destroy them. That’s why I’m here.”

“You just want to exclude me, to keep me safe—”

“—I want to destroy the Horcruxes, and I won’t let your pride get in the way of that, Harry!”

Silence, of the singed variety. Sirius dreamt that night of the look on Harry’s face, the betrayal he had always imagined he would see from James in death.)

Wearing the locket was difficult. The trick was to allow its magic to spread over Sirius just *enough* that he felt the innermost reserve of power begin to activate. At the same time, Sirius extended his own magic, carefully and warily, to probe the edges of the locket and understand what might present a weakness. The very centre of the locket, for example, seemed to flex and open whenever the smoke twisted out of it, and Sirius had a suspicion that much like an eye opening to see, its centremost part would be vulnerable only at that point. So he allowed the locket to pummel him with accusations that he’d killed Regulus, killed James, killed Albus, that he would allow Remus soon to die, that he was failing James’ son. He tried not to listen, and he focused his entire energy on that centremost piece, like a beam of light falling onto the tip of a high, frigid mountaintop.

It whispered to him. Sirius had expected that, and he weathered it bravely. The house had whispered to him his entire life. It had told him he was weak, that he was a disappointment, that he was nothing without the strength of his family. It had told him something of the unhappiness of his parents' marriage; it had notified him when his uncles were upstairs; it had amplified his father's footsteps when Orion was making his angry way to Sirius' room, it had held him down to be punished. (It had sent dreams of his screams and his muffled tears to his father, later, though Sirius would never know). Sirius felt now a sudden surge of defiant gratitude for the house and its predictable attempts to sway him. He had been raised to defy influence. His parents had inadvertently given him the tools he would need to complete this last task. The house, he realised, wanted nothing more than to have him near, to guard him jealously, to keep him safe, to use his magic at will.

Keep me safe now, said Sirius to the house, and he felt the bones of the walls creaking in soft confusion. The house was not used to its heirs being so aware, or so Sirius presumed. He could feel the magic acutely, now that he'd begun to sense everything around him. He felt the source of the house's magic in the ground below, a pulsing, dormant sort of curse, and he understood with a flash that it had been intentional, that his forefathers had entered into this bargain with the house with open eyes.

Well, so was he. *Keep me safe and I will destroy them all,* Sirius promised cannily. *I am the last true Black, and the family line will die if we do not destroy the Horcruxes.*

Regulus had died and the house had not saved him. Regulus had died in a cold damp cave, and the house knew of it from Kreacher's memories. The house knew quite a lot from Kreacher's memories, and the house used Kreacher's magic to make its intentions known.

Castor had died, and Pollux too, and the house had felt Orion's grief and deep-seated guilt. Alphard had died, and Walburga had died, and Orion eventually had passed away, a bloody knife in his hand, and a single gold galleon wedged between his teeth. Bellatrix had died, and Andromeda had all but killed her right to be considered alive, and Narcissa had not returned to the house for many years.

So many of them, destroyed by the same Dark magic that threatened Sirius now.

Sirius closed his fingers over the locket as he heard footsteps outside. Harry. Harry had been acting strangely, and Sirius did not like it one bit.

It was why he *had* to enter Harry's room, though Sirius would previously never have even entertained the thought. Sirius suspected Harry had entered *his* room, but he could forgive that more easily. Harry was the child, and Sirius the adult, and Harry had more cause than most to distrust the adults in his life. Sirius had intentionally kept his door unlocked after he'd noticed that some of his things were awry. He did not have anything to hide, not from Harry.

But something nagged Sirius that his godson was hiding something from him. Merlin, Harry sometimes looked at him with *fear* in his eyes, though Sirius was doing nothing other than acting with caution. Perhaps Harry thought that Sirius ought to be more relaxed, more cavalier about the danger they were all in. The Order had made that mistake, more than once: believing that because Sirius liked to make jokes and play pranks and boast after his brushes with danger, that all he amounted to was a foolish young boy, not to be trusted with anything more pressing. Alastor had never wanted Sirius and James to be on night patrol, and it was true that in the early days of the war, they'd often end their shifts by investigating the nearby pub.

But Sirius wasn't a boy any longer. He'd spent over a decade in prison, and he'd seen everyone that ever cared for him die, save Remus. Even back then, he'd taken his job seriously; he'd only dragged James to the pub because James was prone to fall into bouts of anxiety and sadness that slowed his hand and made him overly cautious. James was at his best when he was bold, brash and confident, and so Sirius took the blame. It was worth a scolding to see James' eyes light up again.

Kreacher was reluctant, at first, to help, but Sirius knelt until they were at a similar level, and explained calmly why he was concerned. (Kreacher had not seen this view of his master since his master had laid sleeping and Kreacher had reached out cautiously to sponge the sweat from his brow.)

"This is a piece of the Dark Lord's soul," he said simply, holding out the locket. Kreacher eyed it solemnly. "I know that you and Mother wanted the Dark Lord to come to power, but He killed everyone, Kreacher, do you understand that?"

"Yes, Master." Kreacher had been seeing the dreams, too. That was always his curse, to facilitate the dreams and other magic as they passed from the house into its inhabitants. Houses needed house elves, as much so or more than house elves needed houses. Kreacher had seen what plagued Master Orion too, and Master Regulus after him, and he had been doing some thinking, in his own way. Dark magic was what gave the house power, and in turn it strengthened Kreacher too—but the locket was *foul*, and Kreacher itched to clean it.

Dust and grime and dirt had never bothered him, not since his Mistress had died, but *rot* was something he could not bear.

"If Harry is hiding something, it will put him at risk. He is my godson and one of my heirs." Sirius continued, suspicious at Kreacher's easy compliance. Sirius had not managed to legally designate Harry anything other than a beneficiary of his will. Narcissa had taken advantage of Sirius' escape from Azkaban to get Draco listed as the heir-presumptive, which had been a masterful move, and so Sirius had to reluctantly respect it, even as he detested the idea of Lucius' son entering his home. "You must watch him, Kreacher. You must see if he has been writing in the diary."

Kreacher turned the idea around in his mind. He was not sure if he liked Master Harry, but he liked Master Harry's friends, despite himself, and he liked that Master Harry treated the memory of Master Regulus with the respect that it deserved. Kreacher did not like Master Sirius either, but the past few weeks had shown Kreacher a new version of Master Sirius, one far more like Master Orion than either would have imagined. Master Sirius had been quiet and purposeful and crackling with barely suppressed magic. He had stalked around the house looking like his father, and the children in his care had been frightened by him. Kreacher was not a sentimental elf; for all his worship of Master Regulus, he had not found it odd that Master Orion was so harsh to his sons. He was comforted by this version of Sirius, as he had been comforted by Master Orion's strength. The house may not *explicitly* want to harm its heirs, but its power needed to be kept at bay by someone equally strong, otherwise Kreacher felt himself tossed raggedly in between the two magics, his skin feeling stretched and weak over the bones of his face. And the house—the house did not like Master Harry, and that worried Kreacher more than anything Sirius could have said.

"He writes in it, at night," said Kreacher finally. "It feels—like *Him*."

Kreacher had not said anything because it only sometimes felt like *Him*, and when it did, it felt more like the magic that used to cloak Master Regulus, back in the days when he was young and strong and clever. Kreacher had known that magic and approved of it. It had strengthened Regulus and Miss Bella too.

But when the boy wrote in the book, it felt less like that version of *Him* and more like the *Him* that had left Kreacher to die, if not for the kindness of Master Regulus.

Sirius went very still. Kreacher's ears cocked as he looked up nervously, gauging whether he needed to pop himself to the safety of his den below. The house was still, too, as Sirius processed that Harry had been *writing in the diary* and not told him.

Sirius stood. Kreacher followed after him, twisting his long ears in both his hands, as Sirius walked quietly to Harry's room. His step was nearly a glide, and the long hallway rug did not dare to crumple under his feet. The door was locked, but Sirius squeezed the doorknob tightly, and the door swung open to reveal Ron, rummaging through Harry's desk, a startled expression on his face as he looked up and caught sight of Sirius.

"Sirius," Ron breathed out, his eyes darting nervously to the door. "I was just—"

"Going through Harry's things?" Sirius inquired coolly. His head felt very clear. Harry would never lie to him about writing in the diary, not unless he was already being influenced by it. "Or did he ask you to fetch him his favourite quill?"

Ron flushed angrily at the clear scepticism in Sirius' acerbic tone. "It's not like that," he said, his voice quiet. "Look, Sirius—Harry's…Harry's not been well."

"Why didn't you come to me sooner?"

Kreacher whined quietly. Master Sirius was standing very straight, and a breeze was stirring through the house. The curse was excited, but Kreacher did not understand why.

Ron hesitated, an expression of guilt clouding his clear blue eyes. Sirius waited, unaware that his knuckles were beginning to go white with how tightly he was pressing his fingers against the engravings on his wand. Either Harry was being possessed, or worse, or he was truly lying to Sirius. Either way, it had to end today. Sirius had not yet risked one of the spells to destroy the locket. He had four chapters left of one of the books that Castor had been reading prior to his death, and he intended to finish them all before trying his hand at any of the spells. But if the diary was possessing his godson, Sirius would take action, risks be damned.

Then Ron lifted his chin and firmed his lips, so that he looked stubborn rather than rueful. "I wasn't going to go behind Harry's back."

Sirius raised an eyebrow and Ron flushed again, deeper this time. The breeze that fluttered through the room swept over the desk, and Ron looked down eagerly to see what it might uncover.

"The diary isn't here, I expect," Sirius continued calmly, glancing at Kreacher for confirmation. "If he's as far gone as I think he is, he's likely taking it everywhere with him."

"So you know," Ron said with evident relief. "Sirius, I'm worried about Harry. He told me that he wasn't writing in it, but I've been…I've been listening outside his door at night."

I've been watching you, Sirius said to Remus, skinny and freckled and twelve years old. ***You're lying to us.***

"You knew and you did not stop him?"

"What was I supposed to do—"

"You're his *friend*," Sirius said incredulously. "You're his best friend, or you're supposed to be, anyway. Friends don't let friends write to the Dark Lord, Ron."

I have to go to the Shrieking Shack. It's the only way to keep everyone safe.

I can't let you do that, Remus. You're going to—you're going to kill yourself, locked up all alone each month.

"Dumbledore told him to," Ron argued back, throwing the words in Sirius' face. "And Harry said he could handle it."

"But if you thought he could handle it, you wouldn't be here, searching his room, would you?" Sirius volleyed back. He closed his eyes to banish the vision of Remus that still lingered in front of his eyes and said tiredly, "Ron, just—go. Tell Harry that we know he's been writing in the diary and that we all need to talk."

When Sirius opened his eyes again, the light in the room seemed different, and Ron was gone. Sirius sighed heavily and leaned against the iron posts of Harry's bed. After Andromeda had fled, the Black sisters had ceased staying together in one room; Bellatrix had claimed the one opposite Sirius, while Narcissa slept opposite Regulus. The bedframe she'd chosen was as harsh and twisted as she, and Sirius felt suddenly guilty that Harry had to sleep here each night, his head where hers had been, his eyes staring at the same patch of ceiling.

"Moony, I'm fucking it all up," he murmured dispiritedly. "I should have let you in. You've always been better with Harry than I have been."

Moony should have been Harry's godfather. Sirius had never asked him if he'd been upset over the slight—Sirius had been James' best man, his best friend, his brother in all but name, and of course he had been godfather to his first child. If James had another child, perhaps he would have asked Remus, but they would never know.

Sirius would have been upset if Remus had been asked ahead of him. Remus would probably have refused, on account of his general dereliction and lack of steady gainful employment and the whole werewolf thing, but James would have bullied him into saying yes, and he would have been better at it. Remus wouldn't have gone after Peter and landed himself in Azkaban for thirteen years. Remus would have written to Harry faithfully, sent him books rather than broomsticks, asked about his OWLs rather than Umbridge. He would have coaxed Harry out of his shell, prodded him gently to speak of his grief over Albus' death, reminded him that he was not alone. Sirius had done none of those things, and Harry was off writing to bloody Voldemort as a result.

You can't come, Sirius. You'll be the one that's killed. Werewolves attack humans.

Well, what if we're not human?

Of course, any goodwill that Sirius could plausibly claim was entirely eradicated by the prank he'd played on Snivellus. Sirius hadn't thought that Snape would be in any real danger, though everyone had seemed to assume otherwise. Sirius was a Black—it seemed inevitable that he was capable of murder, that he'd want to murder his childhood enemy, that he wouldn't think twice about using Remus to do his bidding. (The house, catching this thought, was pleased, and it sent a warm draft of air through the half-open door). Even James hadn't fully believed Sirius when he'd insisted all he'd meant for Snape to do was get a bit of a scare. Albus had certainly thought otherwise, and Remus—

I thought you were my friend.

"I am," Sirius insisted, staring up at Remus' disappointed face, its ashy tinge and reddened eyes.

But you did not tell me you switched Secret Keepers. You did not fetch me when you learned James was dead. You did not come to me when you escaped, and you locked me out of this house and damned me to the werewolf clans.

Sirius felt to his surprise that a fat tear had accumulated on the corner of his eye, like a spider at the edge of her web. He wiped it away savagely and could not strike the thought that it had been full of blood, now smeared indelibly across his face.

"I couldn't tell you, for your own protection," Sirius said weakly. But Remus laughed, and it was richly deserved. Sirius had not told Remus all those years ago because he had not trusted him. He had not fetched Remus because he'd been so consumed with grief and anger he hadn't even *thought* of Remus until much later. He hadn't confided in Remus because he hadn't known if he could trust him to believe him, when Sirius had not trusted Remus, and he had locked him out of the house selfishly as to have Harry all go himself.

But the house readied itself, and the ghostly figure of Remus melted away. Sirius looked around him in confusion and then dropped the locket, which clanged and burned against his chest. He checked his watch—Orion's last gift to his son, left without comment in Sirius' vault—and bit out a curse. It was nearly dark, and Sirius had whiled away the whole afternoon staring into space.

It was no wonder that the children looked at him so warily when he forced his unwilling limbs to carry him into the room where Albus had spoken to him before his death. Sirius looked optimistically at the grate, but it was dark and quiet, and Sirius did not trust his magic to misinterpret his command to light it.

(***You are one of my brightest stars, dear boy***, said the dead man, and Sirius turned away from the glint of Albus' eyes that gazed mournfully at him from the back of the sooty fireplace).

They three like guards, or statues: Harry, Ron, and Hermione, their friendship inviolate, their loyalty unquestioned. For a sudden violent second, Sirius hated them.

"I'm sorry," said Harry, and Sirius blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected Harry to speak first. "I shouldn't have hidden it from you—and from you, Hermione."

Hermione gave Harry an arch, knowing look, and Harry flushed at whatever she implied with her gaze, turning his head back to face Sirius. Sirius swallowed and then sat where Albus had. His father's brandy looked at him enticingly from the sideboard, but Sirius felt too exhausted to stand and do battle with it.

"Is it influencing you?"

"Is the locket influencing *you?"*

Sirius felt his nostrils flaring. "Harry, you know why I have to wear this bloody thing. It's *Slytherin's locket.* It won't be easy to destroy."

"Dumbledore thought I would be able to convince Tom to tell me where the other Horcruxes were." Harry, with his chin out and that dark, mulish expression on his face was nearly

unrecognisable—not James, not Lily, not even Remus, who was never stubborn, only immovable. Yet the look was familiar to Sirius nevertheless.

"Are you *sure* that's what he said?" Hermione interjected, her voice high and surprisingly shrill. Sirius flicked a glance at her and saw to his surprise she looked close to tears. "Harry, that's an absurd strategy, and you're Tom's worst enemy. I don't—I don't think that's what Dumbledore would have said."

"So you think I'm lying?"

"Well, you *did* lie to me already," said Hermione, suddenly belligerent, and the jut of her chin was all Remus. Sirius swallowed. "You lied to me and to Sirius. The only person you didn't lie to was Ron, who didn't have the sense to tell you to knock it off."

"That's not fair—"

"I was trying to protect you—"

"You didn't trust me!" Hermione broke in angrily. It was second year, and the boys had run off without her when they heard the news that Ginny was missing, nevermind that it was *her* research that had uncovered the mystery. She'd had to sneak out to follow them, and they'd nearly come to blows over the large pipe open in Myrtle's bathroom, Ron insisting that she was too *vulnerable* to come and fight the Dark Lord, did she want to haunt a bathroom too? It was third year, and she was alone in the library, crying over her homework while the boys waited until the last minute to copy hers. It was fourth year and her desperate attempt to keep Harry alive, only for Harry to choose *Ron* as the person he would most miss. It was her lessons fueling the DA, it was her guidance being passed over for Ginny's, it was—

Unwanted, unappreciated, unwise, the house whispered to Hermione softly, and she felt a traitorous burst of self-righteousness.

"I thought the diary would target you," Ron said pleadingly. "I thought you'd want to write in it too."

"So you think I'm an idiot?" Hermione snapped back angrily. "You think I would *write* in that thing? It nearly killed Ginny. It's a part of his *soul.* Harry certainly shouldn't be writing to it. It's not going to *trust* his worst enemy, and we *know* it knows who Harry is."

There was a long, pregnant pause. Sirius avoided the look on Harry's face; so did Ron, but for an entirely different reason. It all seemed so stupid, all of a sudden, and Ron felt a flash of guilt suffuse through his body. He should have said all these things to Harry. He should have known better. Hermione was right—Harry should have trusted her, rather than him. If the diary had possessed Harry, it would have been his fault, just as it had been his fault that the diary had taken his sister.

"Enough!" Sirius broke in incredulously. The roaring in his chest had been stilled, at least temporarily, by the twisted tangle of emotions ensnaring the children. "We're not writing in it. Harry, you have to hand it over. You've shown you can't be trusted with it."

"No I haven't," said Harry incredulously. "If anything, I've shown I don't trust you lot."

From the abrupt way Harry snapped his mouth shut, Sirius could tell that Harry hadn't meant to say that last. The truth of it settled around them as heavy and viscous as the mist that seemed to have peered in through the open window and laid claim to their feet.

"I see," Sirius said, heavily. He looked up at Harry and felt he'd never seen him before. James had trusted Sirius til the bitter end, even when Sirius hadn't deserved it. Remus hadn't quite, but Remus had always been a mistrustful sort, and Sirius hadn't trusted him back, so he supposed they were even.

Keep him safe, James had asked, but how could Sirius keep Harry safe when Harry didn't even trust him?

If he doesn't respond to logic, you can't be logical, Sirius reminded himself heavily. Harry was just a boy. Sirius couldn't expect him to respond rationally, particularly so soon after Albus' death. Albus had given that diary to Harry—perhaps the last thing, or the only thing, he'd ever given to Harry. Of course Harry would not be willing to give it up. But should Sirius force him?

Sirius stood and turned, taking a glass down by hand and filling it with water from a spell, more to give himself time to think rather than for anything else. Absently, he passed his hand over it so the water boiled, sending a warm, comforting steam wafting toward him. If Harry was already influenced by the diary, an attempt to remove it by force would only go poorly. It was true that Sirius did not know yet how to destroy the locket either. The only spell he could think of that wasn't too dangerous was Fiendfyre, and he hesitated to try even that in their only safe refuge. What if he burned the entire house to a crisp and they had nowhere to go? But all of the other spells in his research had seemed far worse and came at a far greater cost.

When Sirius turned around, he realised with a start that the three teenagers had taken the opportunity to slip out behind his back. Sirius threw the mug angrily into the grate and watched as it cracked open, the handle clattering into a set of jagged spikes, and the tepid water spilling into the dark maw of the drain. He was suddenly, abruptly, tired of this—of tiptoeing around each other, of hesitating, of being afraid of his own home. Castor and Pollux had killed each other out of their own avarice, their own fear. Sirius had always possessed a prodigious command over his magic; even Minerva had complimented him more than once, though he knew she had been frustrated he chose to channel his knowledge into frivolity. Sirius shouldn't be afraid. He wasn't afraid. He had nothing to fear, except for his own fear itself.

It felt—simple to order Kreacher to fetch the others. He didn't feel afraid, nor any other emotion, not really, save for determination, and a sudden swelling of amusement. The locket wanted him to be afraid, to read the same books over and over, to fear what may happen to them all if he dared attack it. Once Sirius realised these emotions were foreign, it was trivial to overcome them. He'd always hated going into Uncle Castor's lab, but the discomfort he felt now was because the locket knew that this was the most fortified part of the house, the place where they'd be able to destroy the locket without fear of destroying the house. When Hermione pointed out in a small voice that the cauldron she'd used for the Polyjuice was

tarnished and dirty, Sirius snapped his fingers and sent it tumbling down to the kitchen to be cleaned. Nothing in this house would hurt *him*.

The curse was easy too. At the first sight of Regulus' face, ghostly and pale, fire twisted out of Sirius' wand and regarded the Horcrux thoughtfully.

The others tensed against the sudden flush of heat, the great fiery stag that erupted from Sirius' wand and pawed angrily against the ground, but Sirius was cool and impassive, and the house was still. Castor Black had experimented with magics that he oughtn't have, and he had thought that he could use the curse to make himself immortal. Pollux had not trusted the curse, not entirely, but he had thought a Horcrux may be safer, and he had been wrong. Lycoris Black had asked for protection and power, for the ability to access the magic he sensed simmering in the world around him—magic so often thought to be Dark, though Nicholas Flamel would argue most magic of that sort ought to exist without classification. In return, he had bound himself and his descendents. An eye for an eye, a give and a take, and as each generation grew stronger, so did the curse, and so did their debt to each other. Castor had thought to take the curse onto himself entirely, to give forever a slice of his magic to the deep elemental magic that he sensed stirring underneath his childhood home, and in exchange live forever in fierce, wild gladness. Tom Riddle had made a similar bargain, and so had Flamel, and each had paid their own steep costs, and each would nurture their own regrets privately, before the end.

Pollux had not been entirely sure. Though he and Castor were twins (always together, always bound, always gasping for air in the other's wake), they did not always think alike, and Pollux had learned of Horcruxes from the same books that both of his nephews would one day access, and he thought there might be other ways to live forever. Not to mention, something about Castor's vehemence frightened him. Perhaps the curse was better off slumbering underfoot. Better to let Orion deal with it, or Alphard if he successfully challenged Orion's right to the house. Pollux had wanted to create his own power, but Castor had always felt he was entitled to *something* from the Black name, given he had not been given keys to a vault, and he lacked both his father's and his mother's favour. (Perhaps it was the fate of all pairs of children that one would turn out like each parent, locked together in an indelible lifelong bond without the tools of marriage to make their lives better fit together).

Sirius grunted and pushed at the Fiendfyre, willing it to attack the locket, but it seemed to hesitate, swelling and growing around him in a thunderous, sweltering surge. The flaming chimaera growled at him and pawed at the ground, a grotesque mirror of the lions that had yawned and roared at all four of them throughout their childhoods. Regulus looked soberly at Sirius through the flame. Sirius faltered, as Pollux had, and he stared at his brother, seeking an answer in his eyes.

"Why isn't it working?" Harry shouted, his face beaded with sweat. "The locket, it's fighting it off, Sirius."

Sirius shook off the force of Regulus' eyes and thrust harder. His magic sung to him gleefully as the flames built until the small room seemed nearly engulfed in them. It was more magic than he'd ever called before—more Dark magic than he'd ever felt running through his veins

—more magic than he knew he had in him—more magic than the house had realised he could command—

—Harry and Hermione and Ron turned and fled, and the door slammed shut of its own accord behind them, and all sound was cut off, and all heat, and even all light, so that they three clutched each other in darkness, damp with sweat and agony—

—Kreacher grit his teeth and stated at Sirius with those wide, limpid eyes, willing his master to be stronger than those who came before him—

—and the magic of the house swelled in return, gleeful, joyous. Here was an heir who would give it what it desired, and in return, the house would protect it. The flames swelled, but the house was unharmed, as was Sirius—

—and as was the locket, which stayed cool to the touch in Sirius' palm, Regulus' form hovering over it, looking at him with pale, sorrowful eyes.

All at once the Fiendfyre stopped, and Sirius dropped heavily to his knees, exhausted.

"You're not Regulus," he murmured, throwing the locket with force, so that it clanged against the opposite wall. "I know what you're doing."

The smoke billed and flexed as it laboriously changed shape. The Fiendfyre had not penetrated its defences, but it had weakened it greatly, and the locket had to gather its strength for its next attack.

It was Lily, and Sirius sat back on his haunches in shock, his back hunched over like he was Padfoot, and his fingers scrabbled for purchase against the front floor. It was Lily with ashy, matted hair and a smear of silver blood down her face. The muted green of her eyes was shocking, even in this form. Sirius had never seen Lily before, not from the locket. He mourned Lily, as he mourned all of his friends, but her death did not ignite the same riotous pain in his breast that James' did, and he had not thought of her as often. He had forgotten that particular expression on her face, and it twinged painfully to realise he had seen it on Harry's more than once over these past weeks.

"I'm sorry," said Sirius brokenly, though he knew he was merely speaking to a ghost. The words swelled up inside him and he had to say them. "Lily, I've failed you. You and James both."

"*I saw my son,"* Lily said, and even with the stilted, unfamiliar cadence of her words, Sirius felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

"He's writing to the diary," Sirius admitted, too far gone to wonder whether he ought to say that to the Horcrux. "You can feel the Dark Lord's magic on him, Lily. I'm going to stop it, I promise."

The Horcrux paused. So did the house, and then Sirius next. Realisation clanged around them —all three of them: the house's aversion to Harry and to the strange magic hovering over his,

and locket's odd affinity for the boy for the same reason, and Sirius' dawning sense that something about Harry was not quite right.

"No," said Sirius hoarsely, and Lily's eyes looked back at him, mirroring his panic. "*No*. It's impossible."

All of them, said Albus to Sirius. (***Do not falter,*** said the Bloody Baron to Percy, who frowned in confusion. ***The boy must die, and the Dark Lord must do it***, said a portrait to Severus, who closed his eyes and choked down a sob, despite himself. All of them, revolving around this betrayal in their own ways, drawing closer and closer to the centre, to a boy with green eyes who must die for the rest of them to live, a boy who must die by their hands).

"He is an abomination—" began Lily and Sirius scrabbled desperately for the locket, wrapping his fingers around the still-burning metal, scalding himself as he slammed the case shut. But the door refused to let him leave. The house murmured to itself anxiously. Kreacher faded from sight, reappearing with a small *pop* behind the still figures of the three teenagers, their dark heads bent together as they whispered furiously. For a prolonged second, Kreacher saw the pale exposed flesh of Harry's neck and felt the house urging him on.

Then he shook himself and folded his thin, knobby arms inside his robe. The Mudblood had made it for him, and the blood traitor had enchanted it to resist dirt, and the dangerous Potter boy had presented it to Kreacher with a terribly earnest expression. Kreacher had felt the heavy weight of the house's new knowledge, but he had not understood what it implied. He would not act. Not until his Master instructed him, regardless of what the house wanted from him. He needed the house to live, and the house needed him too, but he did not obey it as he was bound to obey his Master.

The house withdrew, slighted, and turned his attention to Sirius, raging against the door, locked in the room where his uncles had died. The house could not tell what Sirius intended —whether the roiling mix of shock and anger and deep-seated terror meant he would dispose of the threat and keep them all safe, or whether he would fall prey to the pathetic sentimental feelings that curled around his throat and hissed at the house's magic.

"You will *obey me,"* snarled Sirius, perhaps sensing this dilemma, and the floor flew open before him in shock, forced open by the strength of Sirius' will.

Sirius leaped out of the door, Padfoot's paws hitting the ground with soft, authoritative thuds, and he nearly flew down the stairs, dodging the house's efforts to contain him. His mind reeled with shock and horror and sorrow, but his gait was steady, and he reached the parlour within minutes. Harry was inside, speaking angrily to Ron and Hermione, and they looked up in surprise as Sirius crashed inside and transformed back, scrambling to his feet.

He could take it from Harry—

He could force Harry—

It was *inside* Harry, and Harry was part of it, and *Albus had known* —

But Albus had not told Harry.

He had told Sirius, obliquely. He had known, and he had told Sirius they *all* needed to be destroyed, but he had not told Harry because how *could* he have told Harry? If Harry knew the truth, he would kill himself in the night, as Regulus had done, a misguided attempt to destroy the Dark Lord with an unnecessary sacrifice.

What if Herry died and the Horcrux survived? What if Sirius could find a way—find a way to extract it, maybe, or—or—or perhaps he would have to do the unthinkable—

Keep him safe, said James. ***Destroy them all***, said Albus, and Sirius drowned in their voices, staring at Harry with wide, unseeing eyes.

Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps the flash of insight that had so cruelly slipped into his mind was just the Horcrux trying to turn him on Harry, or the house going to extreme lengths to have him turn out his unsuitable heir. Albus would have told him, wouldn't he, if Harry were a *Horcrux?* The magic that Sirius had begun to sense on Harry was just the diary influencing him, the stench of being so close to another Horcrux..

But *his* magic didn't feel affected. His magic felt erratic and cold, but never unfamiliar. One's own magic could never feel unfamiliar.

Harry wasn't a Horcrux. Sirius was going mad, and he would not let himself go mad. (He was *alive,* he was *awake*, he was *aware).* They had real battles to fight, real Horcruxes to destroy. He wasn't going to turn on Harry. He trusted Harry. Harry couldn't be a Horcrux anyway. Living beings couldn't be Horcruxes. The snake—the snake was an aberration. Why would Voldemort make his worst enemy a Horcrux? It didn't make sense. *It didn't make sense.*

"You can't write in it," Sirius said abruptly, growing aware that they were all facing him warily, wands out. "Do you understand? You can't write in it. Swear it to me, Harry. Swear to me that you won't write in it."

"I—I swear," said Harry after only a slight pause. "I won't write in it. Sirius, *what happened?"*

"Fire won't do it," he said shortly. "The defences on the locket are too strong. We're going to have to find another way."

“We don’t have another way—”

“We’ll *find* one,” Sirius snapped. He would find a way to determine if his suspicion was true, and if it was, he would find a way to save Harry, Merlin willing.

Harry gazed warily at Sirius. He felt Ron and Hermione shifting behind him, and he knew what they were thinking. Ron wanted them to leave, and Hermione agreed. They thought they couldn't trust Sirius, that Sirius would turn on them, that the locket was capable of stealing Harry's own godfather from him, as Tom had taken everything else.

"Okay," said Harry, and he turned and glared at his friends. It was *his* godfather and *his* solemn duty and *his* prophesied enemy that they were fighting. Dumbledore had left *him* this task, and it was up to *him* how to accomplish it. "We'll find another way."

"We have to," Sirius murmured, and he turned and left them there staring after him as he bounded up the stairs. They had to find another way because the alternative was *unthinkable.*

***

November 1997 // one month remaining

The problem was that Harry *could* be a Horcrux. Living beings *could* be Horcruxes. Nagini was a Horcrux, if Albus was to be believed, and in a way, so was the shade of Tom Riddle that so haunted their world. There could be a bit of Voldemort in Harry. Why else would he understand Parseltongue or get such strange, vivid dreams? He'd dreamt he was the snake, all those years ago. Albus had said soberly that Harry was the Dark Lord's greatest weapon, hadn't he? Sirius thought back to their brief fear that Harry had been possessed by the Dark Lord and wanted to laugh and cry both. Harry could fight off possession; he could throw the Imperius curse, yet he couldn't guard his mind with the simplest of defences. Sirius had tried dipping into Harry's mind and found it upsettingly easy. If Harry were being possessed, he would know.

But if he were a Horcrux…how could he know?

The house didn't like Harry. Harry had said as much, and Sirius had ignored him. But shouldn't Sirius of all people know what it felt like to walk through halls that wanted him gone? The house hated Harry, but the house hated Sirius too. That did not necessarily indicate that Harry was a Horcrux. The house probably hated Hermione too, and Ron all the same.

How could he *tell?* How could he find out? Perhaps Castor and Pollux would know, but their portraits did not hang in the hall, at least not where Sirius could find them, and none of the other portraits would tell him anything. The house managed to control them. It was probably controlling Kreacher too, the traitor. All of those breakfast trays that Kreacher left outside his door—it was manipulation, and Sirius refused to be manipulated.

In the meantime, Sirius knew the others thought him mad. He'd seen Ron watching him with those blue, sombre eyes and noticed the way that Hermione always had her wand ready. He knew he was acting crazy, spending hours in the library, reading books that he forbade them to touch. He knew they were impatient to have another go at the locket, but Sirius couldn't let them near it. What if the locket held the clues to saving his godson? What if they destroyed it and it destroyed Harry too? Who knew what the locket had done to him—the diary—the *thing* in his head?

(*It's just your imagination,* Sirius told himself. *Harry isn't a Horcrux*.)

But sometimes he looked at Kreacher and he felt Kreacher knew the truth, too. Sometimes he felt Regulus' pained laugh in his mind or saw the raw look in Lily's eyes. Something Harry—Lily—James had done had protected Harry that night. Sirius had never known what, and Albus had never told him. He only knew it involved Lily's blood. Plenty of Dark rituals involved blood, as Sirius was all too intimately aware. Perhaps Lily had done something and it had gone wrong.

(Castor Black’s portrait hung opposite from Pollux’s portrait on the third floor, but both were empty. Neither portrait wanted to meet the other’s eyes, even in death, and they watched their nephew but something prevented them from speaking. Perhaps the house did not want them to exert their influence on the only direct surviving heir, or perhaps the house was damning Sirius to his fate, rather than saving him. Either way, they sought refuge from each other in opposite ends of the house, Castor in the basement and Pollux in the attic, and they spoke to nobody, and they moved around only at night, binding the other portraits to silence).

Harry did not agree, strictly speaking, with his friends’ opinion that Sirius had gone insane due to the locket. Sirius wasn’t insane. Sirius wasn’t crazy—he was panicked, and Harry quite agreed with the sentiment. When Harry thought of the fact that was nearly December and they hadn’t destroyed a single Horcrux, that they’d not made any progress on finding the other one save Hermione’s hypothesis that it was the diadem of Ravenclaw, he also wanted to lock himself in the library and avoid the others’ eyes and generally break into tears at any given moment.

Harry was also less upset at Sirius' order not to write in the diary than Ron and Hermione presumed him to be. He hadn't enjoyed how Sirius had looked at him, as if he were simultaneously a small child and a dangerous beast, but he had been strangely relieved to shut the diary and shove it into his trunk. He was frightened of it; frightened of his reaction to Tom's words, frightened of his failure to fulfil Dumbledore's ask, frightened of his own cruelty.

Ron was of the option that they ought to leave. Sirius was plainly acting like a madman, and he discussed it with Hermione when Harry was not around, speaking in low tones, prisoners in their own place of refuge.

"He's being affected by the locket," Ron would say in a harsh, angry whisper. Ron didn't like how Sirius had failed to destroy the locket. *Destroyed beyond magical repair*—that was what the book had said, and Ron was a magical child. He knew what Fiendfyre could do. Many homes had been destroyed by it, in the first war. His own uncles, if he was remembering the story right. Fiendfyre should be able to destroy the locket without an issue. Not to mention—Sirius had broken out of Azkaban. He'd killed people. He'd been part of the *Order*. If he wanted to destroy the locket, he could.

At this point, Hermione would usually press her lips together, unable to disagree, but unable to explain that she still felt their chances of success were higher with the resources of the Black house. That *library!* Hermione had managed to put together a fairly accurate history of the diadem, all things considered, and of Hufflepuff's Cup as well. She didn't want to leave the stifling embrace of the house, not until they knew where they wanted to go.

"Books aren't going to help us," Ron said, more than once. Tom bloody Riddle wouldn't have left his Horcruxes somewhere so plainly that Hermione could *research* it, like she were solving a puzzle for school. They had the diary. They had the locket. They could destroy the locket and make the diary watch. They could singe the edges of the pages, just enough to make that nasty little beast inside squirm. They could—*scry* for the other Horcruxes, perhaps, or retrace Riddle's steps. They could go to Gringotts and look at the Black family vault for themselves, in case Sirius was lying. There were so many ways they could *act.*

And Sirius seemed to want them there. That triggered the loudest alarm charms in Ron's head. Sirius seemed to want them trapped, precisely where he could see them, and Ron had never liked to be *observed.*

Of course, Sirius was not observing all of them. He'd nearly forgotten the others, and as November crept inevitably toward December, he would have been hard-pressed to remember that there was anyone living in the house except for Harry and Kreacher. There were no more Auror games, no more gathering in the kitchen to hear the *Prophet,* no more tales of the Mauraders or thorny Transfiguration scenarios for Hermione. There was only Harry and the house, and Sirius was determined to conquer them both.

The dreams had continued.

(*Pollux, standing in front of his brother's mangled body, a smothered cry of horror and relief and exasperation and sorrow. Castor had been so afraid of relinquishing his power—so afraid of death—that he'd done the unthinkable, and he'd forced Pollux to do the unthinkable too.*

Orion would be back soon. Orion would see what they'd done. He'd banish Pollux, and Pollux would be alone. He was already alone. Castor had left him. Castor had never left him before, and Pollux had thought he never would. Pollux did not know how to be alone. He did not know how to live without the magic of the Black family encased in his back molars and trapped in the air between the vertebrae of his spine.

They'd managed to inculcate an awareness of it, Castor more than Pollux, or so he'd claimed. Pollux could feel his own magic, but he could feel the influence of the house as a throbbing pressure behind his temples, and the cloying embrace of the family line like ropes around his wrists, and the exultant bite of the curse in all the vulnerable pockets of his body. He was feeding it—they all were. It was not magic of the land as they'd first thought, that ancient, elemental magic that he and Castor had felt so acutely in the grounds of Hogwarts. Or if it was, it was a corrupted form of land magic, magic ripped from the land and the earth and the bitterly cold winds, magic that his ancestors had stolen and confined, ripped from the ground and reburied beneath each subsequent Black family estate. It preyed on them, even as it had protected them, and Castor had found it intolerable.

Pollux had agreed, to a point. Blacks were not meant to be protected by anyone other than themselves, not even their own parents. Cygnus had never spared a second's notice on his middle children. But part of Pollux remembered the house with fondness, despite himself. Part of Pollux remembered how it had felt to have Trollund's elf-magic mingling with his own, something right, something familiar. He did not agree with Castor that the Black family heritage and the Black family curse were one and the same.

But Castor had not listened—)

The dreams continued, and as Sirius frantically tried to prove to himself that Harry was not a Horcrux, he managed to convince himself indelibly of the opposite.

And then—they were gone, and Sirius felt like he was drowning. He didn't know how it happened. He'd been upstairs, scribbling frantic notes, when the alarms clanged loudly in the

back of his mind. The door was open. The *door was open.*

He flung himself out of his chair and down the stairs, and his heart was beating like a hummingbird close to death, and he tripped and fell painfully on the ground somewhere past the sixth landing. Voices. Harry and Hermione. Their footsteps quick on the stairs. He tried to yell through the white bannisters but his voice left him. They were leaving. They were *leaving*, their voices panicked. Harry—he felt Harry's urgency, he felt the house's joy—

Sirius leapt to his feet. He ran as fast as he could, but he wasn't fast enough. The door was open. The house had allowed them to leave.

And they had left.

(Ron had seen Harry and Hermione bent over a map of Hogwarts, and his jealousy had flared up brightly in his breast. The comforting, still warmth of the house had long since simmered away into caged frustration, a spotlight always centred on his face, highlighting everything that was wrong with him. After so many months of hiding, Ron had gone upstairs, packed up his things, and walked out.

As Percy would say to him many months later, perhaps it saved his life. Perhaps it was the house bequeathing him a gift. Perhaps the house wanted him gone, or the locket was twisting his thoughts, or Ron was a scared and insecure seventeen year old and his actions were due to no magic at all.

Whatever the reason, he left, and Harry and Hermione followed, as they always would. These three were bound together as indelibly as any blood family, perhaps more so, for they chose their own binds again and again. These three left, and they left the locket behind, and they breathed easier as they marched into the world and took up the task that Dumbledore had laid at their feet.

These three left, and Sirius howled on the stairs with frustration and sorrow and twisted, suffocating pain, and the house moaned with him, sorrowful but triumphant, and Kreacher shut his eyes and crawled into his den, and 12 Grimmauld Place was once again still and empty, and smoke from the empty fireplaces twisted up toward the sky in silent supplication as two Horcruxes moved further away from the house and all of the occupants in the house were able to breathe more easily).

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a bit...jumbled, intentionally so. Sirius is not doing well. Please let me know if it was too hard to follow. Sirius' mind is very different than Percy's.

Next one should be the last one.

Endings

Chapter Notes

I have no excuse for why this took so long, but. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 1997 // days remaining

The rain drew its protective embrace around the house, and the house opened itself to the cleansing heartbeat of each drop, seeking the water greedily through its porous exterior. Thunder rumbled, and the rain was on the verge of snow, cold sleeting daggers that caused three teenagers in a field across the country to huddle together for warmth inside their enchanted tent. Their spirits flagged, and the tension rose, and one of them snapped at the other, and one of them grew tired midway through their shift of watch, and one of them peered out suspiciously through the smear of ice-cold rain and could not make out whether the shape approaching them was a wizard or a cloud and therefore hesitated just a second too long before raising the alarm.

The house blazed in the rain, and in a field across the country, the three teenagers were captured, and one of them cursed the other, so that his face grew ugly pustules and was nearly unrecognisable. A Snatcher rubbed his hands together greedily as he muscled the three teenagers along, digging in his pockets for his extra Portkey, debating whether he ought to call in a mate for reinforcements or receive his reward all by himself. In a large, ornate manor not too far away, a boy with a pale face and a tremble in his shoulders listened as the prisoners in his basement screamed. It was time for lunch, but he was not hungry, and he had not been hungry for many days. To eat lunch with his parents and see their traitorous faces so carefully blank, as if to pretend nothing was amiss…to be served by house elves while wizards below him begged for mercy as they starved…to risk their meals being interrupted by a dark wizard who smelled endlessly of blood and who always stared at the boy with a curiously awful, possessive smile…

The rain howled and it hissed and it brought its frustration down all across the country, and the grass flexed and bent its spindly fingers in an attempt to protect the ground from over-saturation. Two professors in the same castle watched as the storm clouds gathered, and both sighed in distaste, knowing the children would be loud and difficult to corral at dinner, and that the two Death Eaters tasked with keeping order would feel it appropriate to employ force to keep the children at bay. A boy in the Ministry scribbled away, an Imperiused Minister staring blankly ahead of him, and the weight of his world on his shoulders, and he did not think of the rain, not in light of everything else he had to think about, though it was true that this boy often thought of the weather, and often found his moods affected by it.

The Dark Lord was strengthened by the rain, and he exulted in it, even as his magic taxed itself with the effort of keeping up with his wild glee. The rituals the wizard had done to tie his power to the land were nearly complete, yet not fully corrupt, and in this in-between time, the wizard felt more invincible than he'd ever had before, and the world shuddered in his wake, bodies strewn and leaking blood into the ground below. A wizard in a portrait sensed his counterpart's power and felt curiously scared, which enraged him and clarified his ambition. A wizard in the diary had a moment of shocked recognition and felt the same.

And the rain howled around the country, and Mudbloods shook out dampness from their tents and tarps and makeshift shelters and raised flickering protective wards, and Tonks and Cedric shivered in their respective spots as they waited for Charlie and Oliver to land with the latest fugitives, and Arthur Weasley breathed laboriously in his bed and wondered when he would die, and in all manner of nasty hiding places, dozens of the Snatchers wiped the water angrily from their eyes and entertained sharp pangs of regret for the days without this awful enchanted weather, and even the wealthiest of the lords in their manor houses allowed themselves a full second of nostalgia for what their lives used to be and what dreams they used to have.

Grimmauld Place blazed in the rain, as all the lights were lit from within as the wizard inside the house went through each room with his wand alight and his elf at his heels. He had sensed a presence, a Dark presence, and he felt suddenly sure that someone was in the house with him.

Kreacher trailed behind obediently. He had not sensed the same presence, but he had felt a steady unease ever since the children had left and his master had been alone with naught by the locket for company. To raise his concerns to his master, however, would not prove fruitful, even if Kreacher had dared to do so. It had been a long time since Kreacher had the courage to mutter anything under his breath, and longer still since he had wanted to. It was not that he *liked* Sirius now, any more than he had when Sirius was a boy, but rather that something inside Kreacher had awoken to the fact that Sirius was likely to be his last master, and he was bound to him, regardless of how he felt about him.

And following Sirius around the house as he checked suspiciously in each dark corner and directed his magic to clean out the cobwebs in the corners and banish the pixies in the shadows felt oddly right to Kreacher, who extended his magic to match his master’s. Together they cleaned the house, man and elf, and the heads floated one-by-one off the wall and were burned to a crisp, as they ought to have been upon their owners’ deaths, and the army of insects that nibbled enthusiastically through the walls slithered shamefully into the back garden, and the dark mouldy rot that had evaded even Molly Weasley’s considerable powers of cleanliness evaporated in fright when Sirius turned his attention on it at last. Kreacher burned nine floors of cursed curtains and replaced them with new fabric and slept easier at night for the first time in thirty years.

Yet all was not well.

It had been only days, weeks at most, since the three children had left, but Kreacher had watched his master taunt the locket until it at times felt to Kreacher like a creature that slumbered in between its tarnished covers and emerged only in the middle of the night, when

the house was still and Kreacher was tidying the den he'd built for himself in the kitchen. The house was wary too, and Kreacher felt its apprehension and its singed pride. Sirius was the last heir, and the house knew that, yet the house found it difficult to slip in the vulnerable gap in his mind like it usually did now that something else was occupying the space, and Sirius had no attention left to give.

Kreacher noticed that Sirius left the parlour intact, untouched, and even in his old, wizened elf-mind, he felt he had a guess as to why. It was the same reason that Kreacher did not tidy the half-knitted hat nor return the chess pieces to their original positions. Kreacher was not precisely fond of the children either—but these were almost like talismans of humanity, of normalcy, of a time before the *presence* was the only thing either Kreacher or his master could focus on for any appreciable moment, and deep inside Kreacher's mind, he remembered when he had two young masters to guard, two little boys who used to spend hours in that same room sprawled over the rug, playing at imaginary games in low, intense voices.

Sirius, for his part, barely noticed Kreacher tagging at his heels and lending his wand to the mess. All he was fully cognisant of was the desire, the need, the unquenchable thirst to have his childhood home *neatened*, cleaned, rid of filth and rot and dirt and grime and everything in between. He levelled his wand at the cracks in the walls and they stitched themselves laboriously together. Inside his mind, he felt his father's trapped agony, his resentment that his ancestral house was so—*dirty.* He stormed through the bedrooms and left them gleaming, and he thought angrily of his younger brother, of all those wasted years of being afraid of the way that the dust gathered ominously into a cloud when their mother shut the door behind her.

He wore the locket around his neck, and it taunted him, this prisoner trying to tidy his way out of his eternal jail. But Sirius was able to ignore it, sometimes. He felt certain he was going mad. He could feel it in the way that his fingers did not always respond swiftly to his thoughts, to the way that the light changed in front of his eyes without warning. He dreamed of Voldemort and he awoke, screaming in rage, his wand blackening a scorch mark into the opposite wall, which bore many such scars, even as he and Kreacher painstakingly cleaned the rest of the house, inch by miserable inch.

Harry wasn't James. James had been so full of life and laughter, brimming with constant energy trapped in those long, lanky limbs. He had been a blur of movement: jostling whoever sat next to him on the long bench at lunch, careening wildly into the other Chasers at practice, stepping on Sirius' toes as they hid together under the Cloak, bumping shoulders with the other Aurors. Being trapped in Godric's Hollow had been terrible for James, who longed to run again under the moonlight, his muscular neck long, his head tilted proudly upright. James was *Prongs*, whether as an animal or as an human.

Sirius had thrilled to see it. His childhood had been one of hushed economy: a daily allowance of steps, doled out in careful spurts down the stairs, breath held tight; an miserly allotment of words, which he invariably used up by breakfast, after which he'd be rapped on the backs of his hands by his father's wand; a singular betrayal. Even at eleven, Sirius knew he'd be afforded one outburst, one chance, before he was deemed irredeemable. Even at eleven, Sirius knew to guard himself carefully.

No, Harry wasn't like James. He didn't have the swagger or the creases of laughter next to his eyes or the irrepressible cheer that made James so popular with everyone, even with half of his enemies, and allowed him to win over the sceptical and tense Lily Evans, who did not trust easily, not after her sister's hatred and her best friend's betrayal.

Harry wasn't like Remus, either. He didn't have Remus' tired, studied kindness, his quick mind, his surging temper. Perhaps if Harry lived to see the end of the war, he'd learn to be like Remus, as Sirius had always privately wished for himself. Perhaps if Harry was ever an old man, as James would never be, he would learn to sit next to someone quietly by the fire and give them his own warmth, as subtly and tenderly as an old English oak.

Peter—Harry wasn't like Peter, the slimy, traitorous adult Peter, nor the insecure, meek child. Peter had been loyal, until he wasn't, and scared of his own shadow, until he was more afraid of a Dark Lord. He'd worshipped James and he'd resented him, too. No, Sirius had never met anyone else like Peter, and he didn't expect to, though he suspected several of the other Death Eaters were the same way, entitled and deeply insecure in tandem, posturing mixed with cowers.

It was obvious, really.

Harry was like him.

(Somewhere inside the locket, the shade of Tom that raged half-aware and half-monstrous, heard this thought and awakened).

***

The house was growing tired of its war, of its confusion. The curse was complex and dense and nearly alive, fed by generations of Blacks and their tempers, something approaching sentience from the leakage of all those Black minds, minds that went mad and left a part of themselves behind. Yet the curse could not understand this last Black heir, and neither could the house.

(Kreacher was beginning to understand, in his slow, ponderous way, and with each quiet thought that fell slightly through his mind, he grew a little further from the house, and his frail body gained just a small measure of strength).

The house did not like the wizard, but it liked *it* even less. It had felt *it's* magic before, and for a time it had exalted in it. The magic from the chain around the wizard's neck was the same magic that had nipped eagerly at his father's robes and threaded its way through the veins of his brother and cousin. For a time, this magic had strengthened those who came in contact with it—and the house, in its own greedy way, had learned to leech off it, off those vulnerable openings that connected Regulus and his father to the wizard who had bound them.

But the magic now was not the same as it had once been. Perhaps as Voldemort deteriorated—though the house knew nothing of Voldemort, save for what tormented the nightmares of its occupants—and experimented with dark, angry elemental magic, so did the locket become twisted and corrupt. Or maybe it was Sirius himself and his persistent, determined battle against the locket's insidious hatred that was warping what used to make the house feel *excited* and powerful and alive.

The house was unsure, and perhaps the hesitation was what killed Sirius, or perhaps it was what gave him a fighting chance.

Nobody would ever know, either way. If a tree was felled in a forest, away from everything it had ever known, the curse hardly made a sound worth remembering. The tree merely became what it was destined to be: dead, without a thought to what had felled it.

***

The locket had a curse on it. Sirius was certain. It was a sacrifice curse, an ancient one. It required the death of an innocent, and Sirius did not understand why his baby brother did not qualify.

Regulus had died for the locket, died next to it, slid forever into the water as the locket gleamed prettily. Kreacher had seen nearly all of the horrid scene, and so the house was able to show Sirius, and the locket slyly filled in the gaps. His brother had died, and it should have broken the curse that Tom Riddle had placed on the locket so long ago.

(Each Horcruxes was protected in a different way, just as each Horcrux tied to a different part of the Dark Lord's soul, as Percy Weasley had posited so long ago. Hufflepuff's Cup, an item of largess, was enchanted by a younger Tom to bury a thief in their own greed, though he hadn't known that to give the Cup to the Black family vault would warp the spell just enough to allow Narcissa to pluck it nimbly from its perch and give it to her sister. The diary was protected by the basilisk, the instrument of its creation, and the diadem by a ghost of almost preternatural wisdom. The locket's true protection required a sacrifice to break, as all of the old magic did, as Salazar Slytherin would have expected of his heir. They were all protected, in their own ways, and they all had their own vulnerabilities.)

The locket, this symbol of Slytherin's power, the heritage that Tom both loathed and loved…a sacrifice had been needed, and a sacrifice had been provided by Sirius' brother, provided by the very potion that Tom had intended to use to protect the locket in those dark, elemental caves. It should have worked. Regulus had sacrificed himself, and it *should have worked*.

The locket's curse was confused. After several days of intense study, Sirius was able to determine at least that. Whatever Regulus had done was sufficient to break through the first line of defences—whatever power he had held in his death had broken through enough of the locket's protections that all it could really do was produce a shade capable of taunting speech. But the curse was not entirely broken. Sirius could feel the sharp splinters of its magic, and

he felt his mind cut itself on the jagged edges as he pushed himself further to understand them.

(In another world, Gryffindor's legendary sword, tipped with the venom of Slytherin's basilisk was sufficient to break through the last level of defence, but this Sirius knew nothing of basilisks, knew nothing of the cruel irony of being defeated by one's own power. Not yet, anyway.)

Perhaps Regulus was not dead. Perhaps Inferi were not dead, not in the way that the curse expected them to be, and Regulus was living a half-life, a cursed-life, milky white limbs emerging from the dark, inky water…

Or perhaps Regulus had not been an *innocent.* But Regulus could not have killed anyone. He was not capable of it. He was a child in all the ways that mattered. He *had* to be an innocent.

(Kreacher did not know about the things Regulus had done, trembling, at his Marking, and neither did the house. By then, Regulus was Occluding so heavily that it seemed to take several seconds for anything to permeate the blurry, smeared silence of his mind. His father had died and the house was grieving, and his mother had died and he was grieving, and he had pointed his hand through a dark tunnel at a helpless Muggle with a creased face and he had killed him, and each night he killed him in his memories anew, until the night that he drank the potion by the water's edge and the Muggle joined the ranks of everyone who wanted to kill him in return, side-by-side with Sirius and Orion, his nightmares come to life in front of his eyes.)

Sirius wasn't an innocent, not really. He had killed one person. But, the house reminded him cautiously, unsure how to bolster his spirits, he hadn't ever been *sure.* In fact, if Sirius *had* to watch the memory again—as he did, one night, as the house forced him to in desperation—he had to admit it was not *his* wand that produced the sickly red light, not *his* expression of fear and anger that preceded a Dark curse. No, for all of James' bold and brash integrity, he had been a scared young man, with a son smaller than he could ever have imagined, and he and his wife were both orphans, and he'd seen the Death Eater advancing on him and Sirius and he'd panicked, and he'd killed the Death Eater in cold blood.

And Sirius had always claimed it was him. He'd claimed it so strongly that he'd begun to believe it, and James had reluctantly (yet with relief) allowed himself to forget what had actually occurred. Sirius had flung Dark curses before; Moody was always chastising him for it in front of the rest of the Order. Sirius was the one more likely to react impetuously. He'd been closer to the mouth of the alley, where the Death Eater had appeared as if a rent had opened in the sky to let him through.

But it had been James.

An innocent, whispered the house desperately, who by this time had lost any shred of understanding into the riotous thoughts crowding Sirius' mind. *Pure.*

Kreacher felt a strange note of fear. His master had gone very still, and on his face was a curious sense of peaceful resolve. Regulus had died with an expression precisely like that, though Orion and Walburga had both gone to their deaths railing against the inevitable, and

Bellatrix had died in rage, too. But Sirius—Master Sirius was strong, and he was angry, and he was studying the curse, and he was going to win, and the Black line would endure, and Kreacher would be content.

Pure, thought Sirius. *Toujours Pur.*

***

In another life, a twelve year old Harry James Potter picked up the sword of Gryffindor and brandished it in a bloody hand. In another life, Severus Snape placed the very same sword into a frozen pond on Dumbledore's instructions, unaware of the powers it now had and the precise nature of the locket that hung around Hermione's neck at the time. Minutes later, Ron jumped into the pond to save his best friend, and they emerged, spluttering, and destroyed the locket, and that entire nasty period of betrayal was put behind them, and Hermione felt the first stirring awareness of how deep her love for Ron extended when she glimpsed out of the tent and saw him standing there, gloriously alive.

In this life, Severus Snape had no idea where Harry was, and he frankly didn't care, and he knew that the sword hadn't been imbued with basilisk venom, though Albus thought otherwise. Harry spent a frozen series of nights in the Forest of Dean, but with Ron and Hermione by his side, and an unexpected third companion, and there was no enchanted sword to mysteriously save them, no frozen pond, no fairytale saviour. There was an enemy, though, though an enemy that Harry could reluctantly admit might become a friend.

Draco was rude and prickly and entirely unsuited to sharing a tent with three of his worst enemies, and he and Harry had a furious duel in which both wand ownership and grudging respect were exchanged. It was Draco who flatly refused to spend any additional time camping, not when they had a perfectly good ancestral house to access, not when he'd grown up secretly fascinated by Cousin Sirius, who killed thirteen people and went laughing to Azkaban. Sirius would protect them, locket or otherwise, and perhaps Draco felt a certain measure of comfort in knowing that his mother, but not his father, would be able to fetch him if needed, and perhaps even sense where he was, and feel assured of his safety.

Ron, Hermione, and Harry exchanged glances. None of them had forgotten what Sirius had been like, at the end. None of them felt keen to expose themselves again to his lurking, oppressive terror. Yet Draco pointed out that they had two Horcruxes to destroy, and they certainly wouldn't be able to do that when fleeing for their lives, and if they'd been caught once they were likely to be caught again, and they'd already burned through their list of unlikely Death Eater allies.

(Percy Weasley, Draco insisted, would help them—but he fell short of suggesting they find him and ask for his help. Draco had seen how his father had tracked Percy's movements across the room, the unpleasant sting of his interest. The Dark Lord found Percy worthy of note, and so Lucius did too. Draco remembered the curse that Percy had used to kill that

Muggle, and he had to admit that he did not know what Percy would do to maintain his cover, if he truly was on their side.

Ron, hearing this, felt much the same way about Percy as Draco did about Sirius.)

And it wasn't *hard* to get back into the house. Draco closed his eyes and pulled at his magic and with all of his imperious, impetuous entitlement, demanded the house let him in. The house acquiesced nearly at once, perhaps relieved to have the untainted polish of Draco's magic, though it wasn't too keen to let Harry back inside. Draco grit his teeth and he pushed, and the house obeyed him, as it had Sirius only months prior. Here was another heir, perhaps. The silverware rattled anxiously in the drawers and the portraits awakened and peered at Draco's gleaming hair.

The four crept inside. They did not hold hands, but the thought crossed each of their minds in turn, a remnant of their childhood selves, a silent acknowledgement that the house felt eerily quiet and they were all suddenly aware, in their own ways, of their own youth and mortality.

"Sirius?" Harry called out hesitantly. They stopped at the foot of the large wooden staircase. The troll leg was gone, as were the elf heads, and even Draco had to admit that the house looked better than he had been expecting from their stories. Ron narrowed his eyes at the gleaming floor. He did not trust this cleanliness. But Hermione had glanced inside the parlour and seen her half-knit hat still strewn across the armchair.

After a long, weighty sort of silence, where all four had the simultaneous thought that perhaps Sirius was dead and they would encounter his corpse above their heads, a door creaked open. Sirius shuffled out of a room and began to make his laborious way downstairs. Each step seemed to be an agony, a shuffling drag and clank that reminded Harry of Mad-Eye Moody, and Hermione of the black and white horror films her parents enjoyed watching on rainy Friday afternoons with her nestled safely in between their comforting warmth. Harry held his breath as Sirius appeared at the top of the landing and did not let it go until his godfather had laboriously descended to the floor.

"Sirius," Harry said, but in a very different tone than he had upon entering. His voice was pitched quietly to be soothing, as if Sirius were a startled animal, and he held his hands out as Hagrid had taught them on a blustery afternoon in third year, a nearly universal gesture that indicated to most magical creatures that they meant them no harm. "Sirius, how are you feeling?"

Sirius straightened himself in a rough approximation of awareness and peered closely at Harry. Draco, to the side, watched his cousin with horrified awe. He could feel the magic emanating freely from Sirius, dripping wetly from his sides and pooling beneath his bare feet, and he could feel how powerful Sirius must have been, once upon a time. Cousin Bella had been much the same. Her matted hair and wild, careening laugh masked but did not eliminate the clear sting of her magic and the sharp edge of her mind. Narcissa had gone very still when she had heard the news about Bella's death, and Draco had become aware for the first time that his mother was Bella's *sister*, that they shared the same blood and the same childhood, that perhaps his mother shared her power and her cruelty too. He had been awed by it and comforted by it, and for the first time he had thought of his father with something like pity, and he had felt that perhaps he was beginning to grow up. The Mark on his arm (for he *had*

been Marked, had traded his silver circlet for an indelible stain) had burned softly in acknowledgement of this feeling.

It had been horrid to be in Hogwarts, to see his own godfather stalking through the halls with barely concealed agony behind his expressionless black eyes. Perhaps that was why Draco stepped forward, so that he was at Harry's back, and inclined his head to greet his cousin. Draco knew what it felt like to be unsafe in a house, to be afraid of his own relatives, to be afraid of his own heritage, to stand on the dizzying precipice of inherited cruelty and be dared to leap into it without hesitation. Potter spent half of his time worrying that he was either too weak or too evil to be of any use to anyone. Draco had the misfortune of knowing precisely what kind of person he was and having to live with that knowledge.

"Cousin Sirius," said Draco, rather formally. He swept Sirius an elaborate bow, more to assuage his own nerves than anything. "We request refuge in your home."

The pureblood manners seemed to awaken something in Sirius, as Draco had suspected they may. Sirius gave the correct gesture in return, and the house seemed to relax around them, and the floor gleamed far less fiercely than before. Magic thrummed between these two Blacks, and the house approved of Draco and his clear mind, though it was more wary of his Mark than it would have been before.

"Who are you?" Sirius spoke, and from the way he flinched at the feel of the words in his mouth, Draco surmised that he had not spoken in some time.

"Draco Malfoy," said Draco quickly, primarily to mask his suspicion that the question had been directed at all of them, rather than merely at him. He tried to speak clearly. "Harry, Hermione, and I need to avail ourselves of the resources of the Black family home. Have you —" here he faltered, stricken by the burning look of agony that seemed to flicker in Sirius' matching grey eyes as he turned his gaze covetously to Harry. "Have you any…objection to our presence?"

"Harry," Sirius breathed, and the locket gleamed as it swayed around Sirius' neck, prodded into movement as Sirius leaned forward to evaluate Harry more thoroughly. "I thought you were dead."

"Er, no," said Harry after exchanging a look with Ron.

Sirius' eyes narrowed. Ron drew his wand and motioned for Hermione to do the same, his instincts tingling at him. "Unless you are, and this is a dream," Sirius muttered to himself, nearly too quietly for anyone to hear. "Unless you are impersonating Harry and are here to kill me."

"Sirius," Hermione said, her voice high and fluttery like the birds she enjoyed conjuring to twitter at Ron's head. "Sirius, you have to take off the locket."

His attention snapped to Hermione in an instant, and Hermione lost her courage at the dark look of hatred that smeared itself roughly over Sirius' fine features. She had never seen hatred like that before. In this life, Bella was killed long before she could crouch over Hermione and carve *Mudblood* letter by letter into Hermione's arm. In this life, Hermione

had encountered prejudice and jealousy and dislike, but she had never seen hatred, and it took her breath away to see it from *Sirius*.

"What have you done?" Sirius snarled at her, his hand hovering over the locket protectively.

Later, much later, Hermione would think it was an odd question, but in the moment she merely dropped her eyes in guilt, feeling acutely that she had not done very much at all, and what she *had* done had not been nearly good enough. Ron noticed and raised his wand, advancing toward Sirius, determined to put an end to this, to this version of Sirius that caused both Harry and Hermione to wilt into themselves.

And then Sirius moved. Later, both Draco and Ron would discuss it in low whispers, paired for the first watch back on their horridly miserable camping trip, both unwilling in their own ways to subject Hermione or Harry to another sleepless night. Sirius moved so quickly he was like a blur, and he'd Stunned Ron before Ron could even get the first syllables of a shield charm up. It was like he'd leaped into the air, or bounded, and then Ron was down, and Draco was the next in line.

"*Stupefy*," Draco began, but Sirius laughed, and Draco faltered. He recognised that laugh from his nightmares, from having Auntie Bella in his house, from feeling her skeletal fingers drift through his hair. He faltered, and his shield flickered, and Sirius disposed of him and then turned to Hermione, who stared back at him fiercely, having taken the extra second to raise a shield charm the second she'd stepped into the house.

Sirius saw her there and he saw Lily and her accusing gaze, her cool nonchalance at stealing his best friend from him. He saw Andromeda and her perfect life with her daughter and her husband and her warm, comforting home. He saw Cissy and her condescending composure and he saw Bella. He saw his mother, and he did not see Hermione, and he cursed her as he had always longed to curse his mother, who protected everyone but him, and Hermione went down with a guttural scream that echoed in all of their nightmares for months after the war ended.

"*Expelliarmus!"* Harry managed, as he would against the Dark Lord before the next summer solstice, and Hermione gasped herself back to life as the curse wrenched itself violently from her body.

After, Harry could never quite explain what he felt, the incoherent cry of anger he dredged up from somewhere deep inside. His resentment that Sirius had abandoned him, his fear that the locket was too powerful, his growing hurt and sadness that each day felt too large to contain. His fear that he would be next, that the diary in his pocket would take him captive next, that he would lose control of himself and hurt his friends as Sirius was hurting them now. He turned his wand on Sirius and would never know what he would have done had he not caught sight of Kreacher, tugging on his wrinkled ears in silent supplication. Harry bit down on his tongue and at the last second directed his wand to Draco and Ron instead, reviving them with short flicks of his wrist.

Then, an uneasy peace. The house was still. Sirius seemed to come back to himself. He stared at Harry with a sort of grotesque tenderness.

“You're back,” he said, and there was a simple, childlike delight in the words. “You came back to me.”

Hermione, sobbing behind, wrapped in Ron's protective embrace. Draco came up to stand by Harry, massaging his wrists but otherwise impassive, as if he hadn't been felled by his cousin, who would also feature prominently in his nightmares for the next few weeks. Harry shifted slightly to accommodate him—Sirius tracked the movement sharply—and, though he'd never admit it, felt a small frisson of relief to have the other boy's stony countenance by his side.

“We came to get the locket, Cousin Sirius,” said Draco coolly. “We can see it's nearly taken over you.”

“Cousin,” said Sirius, slowly, as if tasting the words in his mouth. “All my cousins are dead, you know.”

Draco flinched, just slightly, but managed to say, “I hadn't heard of my mother's passing.”

Harry moved helplessly, inching closer to Draco. But Sirius threw back his head and barked out a laugh. “Cissy stopped considering me her cousin years ago. So did Andy, though you would think we would claim each other. Bella was the only one who still thought of me as her cousin, and she's dead. Ergo, no Black cousins left.”

“Give me the locket, Sirius,” Harry said, aiming to emulate some of Draco's earlier iciness. He held his hand out and was intently aware of the thud of his heart in his chest.

Sirius looked sadly at Harry, and Harry nearly lost the thread of his composure at the deep well of sorrow that threatened to engulf them both. Sirius had always been sad, he realised in a flash, sad during that Christmas they had spent together, and sad when he’d met Harry in a cave outside of Hogwarts, and sad during these last few brittle months. Harry couldn’t help it; he flicked a glance behind him, where Ron stared back at him solidly, gripping Hermione’s hand tightly. When he looked back at Sirius, his godfather smiled grimly at him.

“Between me and James, I’m sorry it had to be me that survived,” Sirius said softly. He reached up to his neck and lifted the locket slowly and deliberately over his head. Removing it did not appear to provide him with any relief, though they all breathed more easily to see it off his head. “Perhaps that way, you wouldn’t have turned out just like me.”

The gleam of the locket distracted Harry from his confusion, and the entryway was deathly still and quiet as all five of them stared quietly at the Horcrux dangling from Sirius’ hand. It was so small and delicate, yet they could all feel its magic, pernicious and petulant. This Horcrux would have never consented to be made into a portrait or a diary or even a wizard. It was cold magic, old magic, and it felt unfamiliar to Sirius, though he had worn it nearly constantly for weeks on end.

(It is a Dark Magic, brother. It will fell you if you let it.)

“It’s dangerous,” said Sirius, entirely unnecessarily. He licked his dry lips and focused on his godson, who looked grimy and afraid. It felt as if Harry had never been gone at all, like they

had had an argument and wandered into the entryway the very next day. “It killed Regulus, but it wasn’t—it wasn’t enough, Harry.”

“I know,” said Harry quietly. There was an ache in his heart which threatened to overwhelm. “But we’re going to find them all, Sirius, so at least *He* can’t have them. Then we’ll light them all on fire, or we’ll throw them into the sea, or something. We have—we have some ideas of where to look next. But you can’t risk wearing it anymore, Sirius.”

“Regulus wasn’t an innocent, I think,” Sirius continued, still clutching the locket by its gleaming chain. “These types of curses are precise, you know. According to the ancient traditions, Regulus must have lost his innocence. During his Marking, perhaps.”

Draco flinched into himself violently, and Harry thought of cursing Bellatrix in the Ministry of Magic, having her scream under his curse. Hermione remembered pointing her wand at her parents, her hand steady as she erased herself, and she shook. Ron tightened his grip around her shoulders.

“Give it to me,” Harry said steadily.

Sirius smiled when he looked at Harry, and it was a sweet smile, and a smile so full of love that Harry lost some of his resolve. It was the type of smile that Harry had seen in a photograph of his father when he looked at his mother. Harry had left the album in his Gringotts vault, but he missed it like a physical wound, some days, particularly when he contemplated what book he had in its stead. “The house will protect me,” Sirius said, and Harry thought suddenly of his cupboard, which had been small and awful and cramped and restrictive, yet the only refuge he had against the Dursleys. He had carefully collected a series of lead knights and tin soldiers from the stray toys that dotted Dudley’s second bedroom, and for years they had been his most prized possessions. It had been the only space that was his, and Harry had loved it even as he hated it, which he supposed now could be what Sirius was feeling too. He wondered where the toys were now, but then again, Aunt Petunia had probably binned all of his things and hung up her spare coats under the stairs long before his seventeenth birthday.

“Why do you say that, cousin?” Draco said tentatively when it became clear to him that neither Harry nor Sirius could bring themselves to break the silence.

“We made a bargain, years ago,” Sirius said quietly, his eyes dreamy and distant as he recalled the memories he had accessed. He saw it all so clearly, now. “But I think it might have gone wrong. We promised to trade our magic for our protection, but we never should have given up our power.” He laughed loudly and scornfully, and the sound scraped roughly against the walls. “There’s more that’s dangerous in here than there is out there.”

“Sirius, we can leave,” Ron said, his voice gravelly and low. “We can go to the Order. They have safehouses now; they were announcing it on *Potterwatch*. We don’t need to stay… here.”

Sirius did not seem to hear. He had a small, secret smile, and Harry, watching it, felt suddenly all of his anger and fear bleed out of him, to be replaced with an exhausted sort of pity. Sirius was an adult wizard, and at one time he had been fearsome, and he was Harry’s godfather.

But perhaps even Harry's dad would have looked like this during a war, confronted with magic he could not solve, with problems too otherworldly to imagine. Harry had been oblivious to all of this only seven years ago, and at times his incredulity still nipped at him. A dark wizard with immortal bits of his soul; flying carriages and witches' broomsticks and curses that could twist and torture the mind; a prophecy that lay heavily on Harry's mind and consumed his every waking thought. It was fantastical and it was frightening, and it was too big for him, and even for Sirius, though he was trying *so hard* to be strong enough. That suddenly felt very clear to Harry, and he pitied Sirius, for the trying, even as it made him impossibly sad.

"We'll leave tomorrow," said Harry, and they all looked to him for the sudden snap of authority that had been so absent from their motley ventures over the last few months. "But we can't go to a safe house, Ron."

"Great," said Draco, though his distaste was more manufactured than genuine. "Showers all around, and then back to *camping*. If you'd told me this was the plan, Potter, I would have brought a proper wizarding tent. What Weasley brought wouldn't be adequate for a Kneazle."

Ron glared at Draco and, his lanky limbs awkward in the cramped space, squeezed past Sirius, escorting a still-trembling Hermione up the stairs. Hermione had spent the last few weeks with the wards on her shoulders, held up by her resolve and the crisp lines of her magic, and the sudden loss of her protections was as much of a relief as it was a terror. She flinched as she passed by Sirius, and Ron felt a strange, heady sort of rage at the man, who had succumbed so quickly to the bloody locket and led them all to ruin. *Ron* wouldn't have… he *couldn't* have…would he have acted the same?

Draco flicked a glance to Harry and then imperiously took charge, demanding of Kreacher that he serve them tea like a proper house elf, nevermind that it was late at night and more suited to a strong brandy. He immediately disdained Harry's automatic step toward the kitchen and further wrinkled his nose at the parlour with its odd assortment of items, laid out like an exhibition of happier times. "The library, elf," he commanded, bullying the others up the stairs. His father often had met with Draco in the library, and Draco had felt strengthened by the weight of all of those books on the wall, the reminder that his father did not contain all of the world's knowledge, the sense that perhaps he could read his way through the library and bring himself to his own strength.

The library was cold and it was draughty, but Draco dragged the heavy curtains over the windows and lit all of the lamps he could find. They settled on three large armchairs, each dragged from separate parts of the room—Draco and Harry both exulted in the challenge of moving such a large object, Draco by wand, and Harry by hand, though for their own reasons —and tore into the tea.

Sirius ate as hungrily as Draco and Harry, and Draco, with his last reserves of mental acuity, summoned Kreacher and told him to prepare a full meal, to bring trays to Ron and Hermione, and to prepare a selection of nutritious preserved foods that they could bring upon their departure. Draco stopped just short of suggesting they just bring the bloody elf; though he did not know why, he understood instinctively that Kreacher would not live particularly long

once he stepped foot outside, and that in truth the elf should have died years ago, if the house had not invested in keeping its steward breathing.

"The curse," Harry said abruptly, after the growling in his stomach (he was seven, locked in the cupboard, he was twelve with bars on his window, he was fourteen, too afraid to go to the Great Hall and see everyone's stares) subsided. "The…house. What do you mean, Sirius?"

Sirius darted a glance up and smiled, his mouth pulled back far enough that Harry could see how canine his grin appeared to be. Harry would have preferred Padfoot, right about now. "There's a curse," he said, and the house seemed to vibrate in warning. "But there's protection, too. There's never been a Black heir strong enough to reap the rewards without going mad."

Draco thought to himself that this explained some of his mother's reluctance to claim the Black fortune, though she had fought to designate her son as its heir. She had not allowed Draco to see the vault, and nor had she mentioned it to Lucius when the key was formally transferred to their joint ownership.

"So why would the house…protect you against the locket?"

Sirius grasped the locket almost without thinking. The chain swung and pooled beneath his hand, and Draco could not keep his eyes off it, nor could Harry. Both had the thought that they should just reach out and grab it, before the night could get any worse. "Because the locket is a stain against magic," Sirius hissed, and Draco wholeheartedly agreed. "Because the house does not want to lose me to its power."

"We need to destroy it as soon as we can," Harry said urgently, leaning forward and trying to wrestle control of the conversation back from Sirius. "We have some ideas…"

"You won't be able to destroy it until the curse on *it* has been lifted," Sirius said, settling back in his chair. "I'm working on it, Harry. I've almost got it…"

"It's almost got *you!"* Harry stood and thrust out his hand, and Sirius saw James, suddenly, and felt his limbs go nearly limp. James had been the most adamant that Sirius should leave his family, that he should turn his back on them and never look back. Remus had supported Sirius, but he hadn't understood, not at the time. His family wasn't Sacred Twenty Eight, and he would never have the chance to be an heir of anything at all. He had poorly mended clothes and a persistent, gnawing hunger in his stomach, and he had looked at all of the riches that Sirius had to his name and pointed out angrily that Sirius could do something *meaningful* with his power and his heritage, rather than fleeing from the weight of his responsibilities.

But James had understood, and James had stood in front of Sirius just like this, his brown eyes blazing in precisely the same manner, and shouted at Sirius until Sirius had stood and shouted back. They'd said all sorts of things to each other, ugly things, hurtful things, the types of things only said in desperation, the types of things only said between people who love each other desperately but understand the value of wounding each other into action.

"It was worth a try, James," said Sirius, and Harry almost lost his nerve. Sirius knew it was Harry in front of him, instead of James, but Harry didn't know what Sirius was aware of

anymore, and it was frightening to feel invisible, like a ghost, like he too was trapped in the mouldy web of Sirius' memories.

"Sirius, give it to me," Harry said, striving for an even sort of tone, though he was only seventeen and he was tired and he was so frightened of the diary in his bag and the locket that he wanted to sink to the floor and scream and never stand again.

To his and Draco's joint surprise, Sirius obeyed, and the locket was strangely warm against Harry's touch when Sirius dropped its coils in his palm. Harry looked at the *S* etched into the front and wanted to throw the locket through the window and leave it to rust into the muddy ground.

"We can leave tomorrow," said Sirius, and then he turned and fled, his feet padding against the same rug-covered floors he had tread on all his life. He passed the window where Regulus had fallen and made it into his own room before he slid to the floor and wrapped his arms around his knees, struggling against the unfettered relief of having that *thing* turned over to his seventeen year old godson instead of to him.

He would take it back. He would. He just needed—a second to himself, to process what had happened, to plan his next move without the locket's cold laugh in his ears.

"Master," said Kreacher, opening the door cautiously. The room was dark and cold, and the trees outside made strange, menacing patterns on the walls. Kreacher swallowed and gathered his courage and stepped inside.

He had come to bring Sirius the full supper that Draco had requested, and indeed the four teenagers were already gathered in one room, alternatively showering in the adjoining bathroom and indulging themselves in the hearty fare. Yet Kreacher found himself placing the tray tentatively on the floor and making his way to his master, who in this huddled form looked more like the child that Kreacher remembered than the strange adult he had become while imprisoned.

"It's going to end, I think," Sirius said aloud, and to Kreacher's surprise, he felt tears stinging his own eyes, as if he were a human, rather than an elf. He knew what his master meant, and the house did too. It was why it had been so dormant lately, so compliant to Sirius' campaign against its filth. There was very little in Sirius that the curse wanted anymore. It fed on wild, desirous rage, unchecked ambition, hatred, envies. The thoroughfare that had led generations of Blacks to twisted ends in attempts to quell the roaring in their ears. Master Sirius had betrayed the family when he fled, but Master Regulus had betrayed them, too.

The deaths of Castor and Pollux, so soon after each other, so horrid—they had influenced Orion more than he would like to admit. The house had sent him dreams of warning, but Orion woke each night dripping in the sweat of his own regret. He was head of the family, of the *entire* family, and he should have protected his brothers and set them to rights. Blood was precious, blood was rare, and now the only person left with the same blood as him was Alphard, who had been burned off the wall the summer before. His own son seemed to be going the same way, petulant and rebellious, and so powerful that Orion felt afraid of him, of his own mind in another boy, of his own flesh stretched against another's skeleton.

What Orion had seen, that night, was how alone he was. He had seen so many generations of Blacks betraying each other, so many battling Light wizards who wanted to eliminate their power. He had seen himself not as an inviolate tower of strength but a brittle, vulnerable sort of thing. There was no power in the world save what he created himself, and if his family had damned him to a lifetime of solitude, he was entitled to the power they had trapped beneath the floorboards and left as his heritage.

Orion was a cruel and hard man, unkind to his wife and his sons, but he hadn't deserved how he had died, either, when the house had tired of him and turned its attention eagerly to Regulus, to try again with a new boy, as it had for so many generations.

“The end, Master?” Kreacher asked, his voice creaky from disuse. He felt stronger than he had in quite some time, though his master was plainly deteriorating in front of his eyes.

“The end of the Blacks.”

Once pronounced, it echoed between them, they who were bound together in their shared complicity. Orion dead, and Walburga. Bella, Regulus. Andy off the tree, and Narcissa far and distant. Nymphadora and Draco were all that was left of them. Once Sirius succumbed—for he was going to succumb, he could feel it in the weariness in his bones—there would be nothing left of them, and it was his fault.

You could have made something of your heritage, said Remus.

The Black family needs an heir, said Regulus.

Protect Harry, said Albus.

“Harry,” said Sirius out loud. “Kreacher, he—he needs to know something.”

But he hesitated. He couldn't tell Kreacher; he did not want to tell the house. But Harry needed to know.

The locket seared around his neck, and Sirius grimaced in pain. He had one fight, first. Hermione might figure it out, or Ron, whose mind had impressed Sirius more than once. Or the Malfoy kid.

But nothing would matter if Sirius didn't break the curse on the locket.

“Master?” Kreacher said.

“Protect Harry,” Sirius said finally. “Kreacher, I can't…I can't order you to. Not if I'm…”

Kreacher regarded Sirius soberly and silently, and in the sudden stillness of his large, green eyes, Sirius had the strength to continue.

“Not if I'm dead,” he said, and if his voice was hoarse and his eyes teary, there was nobody around to see. “But please, Kreacher. Try to keep him safe. Let him stay here as long as he needs.”

The house would not want to let Master Harry stay, but Kreacher measured himself against the house and felt for the first time confident that perhaps he could command the house, rather than merely succumbing to it. It was *his* house, and he had poured his life into caring for it, and it would listen to him, and trust him to know what the Black family needed.

“Get the locket,” Sirius ordered hoarsely. “I can destroy it, Kreacher. I can destroy the sacrifice curse on it. Then any of them can use Fiendfyre, do you understand that?”

Kreacher regarded Sirius soberly. Sirius raised his eyes and straightened himself under his elf’s gaze. He did not apologise, nor did he ask again. He allowed himself to be evaluated, quietly, and there was a certain measure of relief in it, in knowing that Kreacher knew everything about him and the house too, that Sirius would soon be free of this world, his last duty discharged.

I’m sorry, Albus, thought Sirius, as Kreacher disappeared to fetch the locket. Albus had bidden him to destroy them all, and Sirius would barely destroy one. But he would leave Harry the house. He had written Remus and Andy both a note, a few days ago, when he’d felt the first stirrings of awareness that perhaps he would not survive the year. Harry would not be alone because Sirius was not alone, improbable as the idea sounded when he voiced it in his mind, and it gave Sirius some small measure of peace to know that Harry would have other adult wizards who knew of the Horcruxes and could strive to destroy them.

The locket had been forged for Salazar Slytherin himself, made of silver melted from the rough coinage of the village. Slytherin had been a Lord, or so Sirius had learned, and according to the history books, his people had loved him and wished to celebrate the founding of Hogwarts with an irreplaceable heirloom. Nobody recorded how it was enchanted, but Sirius recognised the signs of a sacrifice ward, and he felt he had an idea. Perhaps a long, solemn line of villagers, dirty yet resolute, each dripping a precious drop of their blood into a large gleaming bowl. Perhaps they had lit a fire in the middle of the town and all joined hands around it, donating their magic to the flames. Perhaps their contributions had been forced, and the historians threatened into silence.

Sirius hadn't been able to discover how Tom Riddle got his dirty hands on the locket, but he *had* been able to study the Horcrux curse. He had identified how the enchantment twisted cruelly around the protections and fed their power into its own defences. The locket would have to be destroyed beyond magical repair, yes—but the protections were ancient, and so they would only be conquered with equally ancient magic.

And Sirius could think only of *one* type of ancient magic at his disposal.

He moved heavily up the stairs, pausing by Harry's room. His godson was breathing softly inside. He did not sleep like James, who got hopelessly entangled inside the sheets and often woke with them all flung to the side. He slept so still and so quiet that Sirius had often feared he too had succumbed to some sort of curse.

Sirius paused by the door, but he did not go in. His mind had been fixed along a path, and he knew that to look upon Harry's face one final time would cause him to waver. Instead, he stepped into Regulus’ room and regarded the familiar decorations in silence.

“I wish you'd come to me,” he said finally, and the house rustled, not able to protect itself or exploit the strange note in Sirius' voice. The house could understand regret, or guilt, or anger, or envy—but Sirius felt curiously calm, and the house could not affix itself to the smooth impenetrable surface of his mind.

Kreacher reappeared quietly, holding the locket. Sirius tilted his head and regarded the elf.

“What does it feel like, when you touch it?”

Kreacher flinched to be so openly addressed, but he looked down at the locket and the expression on his face matched the one on Sirius', though neither knew it. “Dirty,” said Kreacher in disgust, and Sirius barked out a laugh and reached for the locket. His ears began to roar, and his skin broke out in pained shivers as the locket or the curse or the house or perhaps just Sirius' own magic leapt screaming into the world, one final protest against all that had befallen them.

Sirius gasped loudly and sunk to the floor, his eyes half-shuttered and his breathing ragged and uneven. He was dying, anyway—the house knew it, and Sirius knew it, and even Kreacher knew it, so tied as he was to his master. He was dying anyway, and the house hungered for the sweet bite of his magic, and the locket knew in its strange, half-conscious way that it needed that same magic to rebuild its protections. His own magic felt suddenly precious to Sirius, who had never spared a second thought to the privilege of power that sparked in his veins since birth.

Had Regulus felt this before he died? Had the locket tried to take him, too? Had he been afraid at the end? Had James died before Lily, as the historians theorised? Had James felt guilty that he'd not stopped the Dark Lord, or had he died with the satisfaction of a final duel against his worst enemy? And Albus—how had Albus felt, confronting his death after a century? Sirius had not even managed to survive half a lifetime.

Regulus hadn't even survived a quarter, he reminded himself, and with a surge of energy, Sirius got to his feet and withdrew his wand.

As his fingers gripped the engravings on his wand, the Horcrux gathered its strength and leaped out at Sirius. Sirius sank heavily onto the bed, thrown back by the force of the Horcrux’s ire and panicked rage. It was not *alive*, but it was *aware*, and Sirius felt the house awaken in turn, and they three raged together in a storm of agony. Sirius felt himself tossed roughly between the creeping fingers of the house and the punishing grasp of the locket and he gasped helplessly, unable to kick to the surface and wrestle control of his body back from the duelling forces who sought to use him.

A fourth magic, an unfamiliar one—yet a magic that used to clean Sirius as a baby, a magic that cleaned his sheets each night and prepared his food, a magic that Orion Black had bound indelibly to his two young sons in a futile attempt to protect them from harm. Sirius reached for it automatically, and Kreacher cried out as Sirius grabbed for it and used it to clear a small pocket of clarity from within the swirling fog of his mind.

It is a threat to all of us, Sirius thought savagely. *The Black line will end, and the house with it.*

The house wailed at the thought, of standing empty and cold, of falling into the awful inert silence of disuse. The magic within had been called into being by one of Sirius' ancestors, and it had tied itself to their lineage child by child, and it had kept itself active by any means necessary. It could not bear the thought of that effort being wasted now, not after everything.

The villagers had thought Salazar Slytherin would be immortal, and perhaps he had tried to be, and perhaps he had succeeded and even now was living somewhere on the world in a state of suspended agony. They had feared his power and they had respected it, and they had bound themselves to it in turn. Most protections of the time required a sacrifice; life was the only thing most had to offer, the only treasure worth guarding. Pollux Black had tried to use the power of the dead to bring his brother back, and the attempt had taken everything he had to offer.

My life, for his, thought Sirius, and he gripped the locket tightly to his chest. *I relinquish our claim to this magic, and I relinquish my right to its protections. A curse for a curse, and a life for a life.*

Protected from the rain in the centre of the old, musty house, a portion of Tom Riddle's soul stuttered with surprise, and the Black family curse paused in its attack, and the old protections of Salazar Slytherin faltered. None of these forces could understand the sentiment, and so none of them did, and as Sirius relinquished his magic and allowed himself to die, he felt their power flicker and wane around his body as they all fought for dominion of something he had given up freely for all of those he loved and who loved him in return.

Kreacher felt the moment that his last true master passed, as he'd felt it when Regulus died, and Orion, and Walburga too. To his surprise, his grief pinched at his chest and tightened his lungs—but his head felt curiously clear. The Black family curse that slumbered uneasily behind his eyes had seemingly vanished, and as he reached out cautiously with his magic, he felt only the shifting awareness of the house as it would appear to any elf. All magical spaces were aware in their own ways, though usually only their elves were capable of seeing clearly, yet this awareness felt…cleaner, simpler, and the heavy grief and gripping guilt that so often twined over his shoulders seemed to have pooled at the floor and slink quietly away.

He crossed over hesitantly to Regulus' bed. Death rendered Sirius' face stiff and immobile, and his brow was creased. He had not passed peacefully, and Kreacher did not stop and wonder, as Andy would, the next morning, whether Sirius was at peace now. Such concerns were outside the realm of Kreacher's care.

But Kreacher reached out, and he passed his fingers over Sirius' brow, and Sirius' eyes closed slowly and the lines between his eyebrows melted away. The locket around his neck was still and dormant. Kreacher prodded at it cautiously and could sense its roiling evil magic, yet he could tell that some extra quality of malice no longer lurked in its gold centre. It was merely a Horcrux now, susceptible to the same magical forces that all Horcruxes were, and without Slytherin’s extra protections it would be destroyed within the year.

In Wiltshire, Narcissa sat up in bed as she registered Sirius' death, and to her surprise she felt tears against her cheek when she lifted a palm to check. She had never been particularly close to Sirius; they had been too different, she with her icy exterior and he with his fiery rages. Yet even their differences marked them as bound, for their opposite defences had been forged in

response to the same danger that lurked at their feet. Narcissa had mourned Bella and Regulus, and in the privacy of her mind she mourned Sirius too, though he had been taken from them the moment a Hat declared him for the opposite side of the war.

Andromeda felt much the same, though her sorrow was tinged with guilt and a fierce sense of pride. She and Sirius had been the outsiders of the family, but she had not allowed them to establish their own tribe. Each had passed to adulthood alone, and thus her daughter was deprived a link to her mother's past. That Tonks each day grew into a shadow of her uncle was a source of joy and pain to Andy, who missed Sirius as much as she missed her sister.

Yet Tonks and Draco felt only a mild sense of sorrow as they slept, and when they awoke the next morning, they did not immediately know what had befallen their family. They had not been raised according to the Black ways. They had not contributed their blood to the Black magic, nor asked for protection in return. The magic that hovered around their shoulders and buried itself in their chests was magic of their lineage but not magic of their heritage, though it would be many years before either learned the difference.

Morning broke over Grimmauld Place, and soon it would be empty, as Harry would discover the horrifying news that another adult had left him, and Hermione would convince them to leave the locket behind. She did not like the harsh quality of its whispers, and she felt shamefully frightened to be close to it, her Gryffindor bravery be damned. Ron did not disagree, either; he knew, perhaps the best out of all of them, that Sirius would not have succumbed to the locket unless he'd truly felt he had no choice. Only Draco did not want to leave the Horcrux behind, but since he alone was capable of returning to the house to fetch it at his own leisure, he quieted his instinctive protest when he saw the relief that crossed Harry's face at the notion of leaving everything behind.

Empty, the house slept. Down beneath the floorboards, blood dripped softly into the wet dirt underneath. It had been suspended for some time as a fine mist, hovering above the ground, and now with an exhale it finally fell, and the ground drank it in thirstily. The wardstone in the corner of the garden—carefully placed where the moonlight shone the fiercest, as according to the old traditions—flexed and groaned as it registered the weight of its new responsibilities. It had shared its duty with the curse for so long that it had grown used to negligence. The wards had let all manner of *things* through, things that crawled in the walls and drove Orion Black to panicked disgust each time he contemplated them. Yet now the magic pricked at the stone and the stone shook itself awake and set to work. The Black family was still present in the world, despite what Sirius had said, and while its members breathed, the wards would have to protect any that sought shelter within its grasp.

The house slept, and much like its master only months prior, it healed as it did so. Kreacher set to cleaning with the same slow deliberation that he employed for most tasks, but the grime slid off when he scrubbed at it, and the doors stayed open when he propped them up for air. The house slept, and it healed, and small fissures in the wallpaper closed, and decades of burnished slime slid from the pale windows and pooled in the garden, and the magic that flowed freely between Kreacher and the house delighted in the smooth languid slip of the current between them.

Soon, Andy would return with her daughter and a nephew a few times removed, and they would examine the damage and make a plan for the future. Soon, the four teenagers would gather, clean and fed yet sore and aching, to discuss their next steps.

It would take many months, if not years, for these four to understand precisely what Sirius had done and why it had been necessary, and only when they learned the full truth would some measure of tension be released from the memories of these strange and awful times together, some of the most precious moments shared between Harry and his godfather and his friends, and yet indubitably some of the most horrid. But for now, all was still, and for now, all was well, and the house slept once more, and Kreacher took up residence in the den in the kitchen, and he kept the house gleaming and clean, both he and the house waiting as they were bound to wait, day by day, for their next master to step inside and claim his heritage as his own and awaken them to action once more.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all for letting me experiment with a new writing style. I don't think this went as well as I thought it would, but it was good practice, and I enjoyed writing it, and I hope you all enjoyed reading it! I have a couple of extra scenes written from Harry and co's perspective that I opted not to include here because I thought that Sirius' story ended and to add the others would be a bit of a tangent. Keep an eye out; I might upload them as a separate series of one shots / disjointed scenes, if anyone is interested.

If not, I'm working on a new story outside this universe! It is a "Percy is trapped in a time loop!" story, so may contain some of the same themes of ASOR but will be quite different, I think.

As always, come chat with me on Tumblr under the same username! If you are posting any ASOR or tom/percy work, please send them to me, I love reading everything you all talented people come up with.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!